

# ON THE SOCIOCULTURAL BODY OF KNOWLEDGE. ASPECTS OF A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE\*

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The author defends the anti-representationalist claim that the formation of the proper names (and as a consequence – scientific terms or notions) cannot happen through certain ostensive pointing at some objects given here and now (like in B. Russell's theory) or through perceptions which are generalized inductively or by means of Kantian apperception or Anschauung. In order to answer the question about the concepts formation we have to take into account the historical and socio-cultural background of the genesis of proper names which form the foundation and boundary of all classifications including the scientific ones. The author claims that there is an important difference between a personal belief or propositional knowledge and some implicit or background knowledge of the language community in its historical development. The first one could be evaluated on its truth / falseness. The second one however – being the foundation for the first one – cannot be evaluated in this manner. It simply is as it is.

**Keywords:** anti-representationism, proper names, language community, knowledge

# О СОЦИОКУЛЬТУРНОМ ТЕЛЕ ЗНАНИЯ. НЕКОТОРЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ ФЕНОМЕНОЛОГИЧЕСКОГО ПОДХОДА К СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ФИЛОСОФИИ НАУКИ

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Автор разделяет антирепрезентационистское убеждение, согласно которому формирование имен собственных (равно как и научных терминов и понятий) невозможно расселовским путем оцененного указания на какие-либо объекты, данные здесь и сейчас, или через обобщение восприятий по принципу кантовской апперцепции. Исследование генезиса понятий требует учета исторических и социокультурных условий их формирования. Автор полагает, что существует важное различие между личным убеждением, или пропозициональным знанием, и некоторым фоновым знанием языкового сообщества, существующим на определенном историческом этапе его развития. Если первая разновидность знания может быть оценена на предмет своей истинности или ложности, то вторая, находясь в основании первой, не подлежит подобной оценке.

**Ключевые слова:** антирепрезентационизм, имена собственные, языковое сообщество, знание

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## Implicit knowledge and the ground of truth

Whoever claims to work on the social philosophy of science will have to face the objection that he is directing our attention to a historical perspective which may open a more or less interesting field of research, but which is fruitless when we deal with the logical problems of the discovery and justification of scientific knowledge. Kuhn's figure of "normal science" and the constructivist position of Goodman in his "Fact, Fiction, and Forecast" [Goodman, 1983] may be seen as examples for such immense conceptual challenges, which were to a certain degree dismissed by the mainstream of Philosophy of Science by pushing them away from the logical into the historical perspective. It is therefore highly important to start the sociocultural reflection of science at a level on which the connection between the logical and the historical perspective is obvious. One important example for the work at this level is Kripke's theory of proper names as *rigid designators*, i.e. as expressions which get their reference to the objects they designate not by any kind of description they stand for, but by their connection to the original act of giving the name to the singular object to which they refer and to which we refer by means of them [Kripke, 1991]. It is this original act by which a person is "called" by her name which fixes the reference of that name, and it is our repetition of that original act when we refer to that person by her name: "whatever this relation of calling is is", according to Kripke, "really what determines the reference and not any description" [Kripke, 1991, p. 70] by which the name could possibly be replaced. In order to characterize that relation, Kripke spoke of an act of "initial baptism" and a "chain of communication" that reaches from the baptizing act up to our use of the name.

To point out the relevance of this well-known position for our context, I have at first to remind us of the critical aspect of Kripke's analysis. It was especially Russell's theory of proper names as abbreviations of descriptions that Kripke opposed by his view of rigid designation. For our context, it is one presupposition of that Russellian position which is of genuine importance. We can call that presupposition the "representationalist" view of the designating power of our expressions. What I mean by that is simply that for Russell that designating power is logically grounded in a momentary situation which connects the consciousness of a speaking subject with the object of his speaking which is in the world out there; the world is represented by him here and now, in the moment of speaking. Russell claimed therefore that the only pure proper names of our language have to be found in the demonstrative pronouns "this" and "that" when they are used in a situation of the subject's pointing at the actually present object to which he refers. What Russell neglects when he in this model postulates a logical relation between our ordinary "names" and these instruments of immediate



pointing is exactly the historical background that leads back to a past event through which the name of somebody was given to him, an event that is not represented in any psychological or logical sense, but *repeated* in our use of a name.

What makes that opposition to the “representationalist” view of reference especially important for the issue of a social philosophy of science is, however, the second step: Kripke applied the “baptism” theory of proper names to our terms for natural kinds as the second and extremely important example of “rigid designators”<sup>1</sup>. When we use a term as a designator of a natural kind, e.g. gold, we “as part of community of speakers have a certain connection between ourselves and a certain kind of thing. The kind of thing is *thought* to have certain identifying marks”. But, even if the identifying marks of such a thing change radically, if, e.g., we would discover some day that it is only an optical illusion that causes mankind to perceive gold as a yellow metal and that its colour is actually blue, we would not say that gold does not exist; we would say that gold is different from what we thought it to be. The reference of the term “gold” is not fixed by any set of descriptions which the term stands for, but by the initial grounding act of our connection to gold by calling it “gold”. Therefore, according to Kripke, the decisive line by which we are connected linguistically with the world is not an ideal logical transition line between our everyday use of names or terms for natural kinds and a largely fictional act of immediate pointing at some present thing, but it is the line that leads us back through the history of our speaking community to the initial event of grounding its, and thereby our own, contact with the world. And, of course, the “initial baptism” is an event which we neither can remember nor revise nor correct because we cannot judge it by any categories of “true” and “false”. For us, to know how to use our terms for natural kinds means to have acquired our society’s implicit knowledge about the world’s structure which is constitutive for its composition of species and other kinds of entities. It is implicit knowledge that can be characterized, as Polanyi did in his *Tacit Dimension* [Polanyi, 1966], as “tacit knowing”: we can know more than we can tell<sup>2</sup>. It is exactly the historical dimension which justifies such a characterization: by this implicit knowledge we are ahead of everything what we can tell here and now as we are behind of everything that could be corrected by any actual discovery; the word “we” here refers to a sociocultural entity which is essentially and necessarily reaching back behind and ahead of our individual existence. It is that entity which constitutes the kind of contiguity by which our speaking and thinking keeps us in touch with the world. And it is the relation of our personal existence to that entity which makes the genuine difference between such implicit knowledge and any personal

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<sup>1</sup> “According to the view I advocate, then, terms for natural kinds are much closer to proper names than is ordinarily supposed” [Kripke, 1991, p. 127].

<sup>2</sup> Cf.: [Davies, 2001].



state of belief: as we do when we claim explicit knowledge, when we speak of our belief we refer to an act with a propositional content that can and must be true or false. Implicit knowledge, however, gives us the connection to that ground of language and thinking of which Wittgenstein said in *On Certainty*: “If the true is what is grounded, then the ground is not *true*, nor yet *false*” [Wittgenstein, 1971, § 205]. Implicit knowledge is the cognitive basis of that “picture of the world” which, according to Wittgenstein, “I did not get... by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background by which I distinguish between true and false” [Wittgenstein, 1971, § 94]. For our context, it is of special importance to understand the sense in which in this phrase Wittgenstein uses the sociocultural term “inherited”. This will bring us to what we can call a sociocultural body of knowledge as the genuine connecting element of the logical and the historical component of scientific thinking.

## Implicit knowledge and symbolic life

In order to do this we must follow a much recommendable demand which Roger C. Poole formulated when commenting on analogies between some passages of Lévi-Strauss and “the problems that Wittgenstein was wrestling with all by himself in a different milieu of thought, and regret that English philosophy has never thought it worth while to examine the immense richness of structural linguistics and structural anthropology for a possible set of solutions to Wittgenstein’s hermetically sealed-off problems...” [Poole, 1966, p. 530]. This demand should be considered not only with regard to Wittgenstein. Ten years before Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity*, it had been Lévi-Strauss who in *The Savage Mind* anticipated the same critical perspective on the representationalist view of our linguistic connection with the world and gave a considerably deeper reconstruction of the link between the sociocultural practice of giving names to persons and things and the structure of the world to which we refer in our terms for natural kinds. In one of the most central chapters of the book, “The Individual as a Species”, Lévi-Strauss follows the way in which a “savage” society manages to establish the original connection between natural kinds and proper names. This way is based on the continuity between the signification of natural entities and its transformation into the names of the society’s individual members. In this we find an act of transformation which presupposes, but also transcends, the logical aspect of signification: “all the members of the species *Homo sapiens* are logically comparable to the members of any other animal or plant species. However, social life effects a strange transformation in this system, for it encourages each biological



individual to develop a personality; and this is a notion no longer recalling specimens within a variety but rather types of varieties or of species, probably not found in nature...” [Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 214]. In our context we cannot go into the question about the ontological nature of that development of personality; what counts for us is that, according to Lévi-Strauss, the decisive source which allows the society to make that transformation is the available stock of designations of natural kinds which it takes and exploits as a natural reservoir of the genuine cultural task to classify and organize the positions of its members within the social system. The endpoints of that work of classification are the proper names given to its members. “From a formal point of view”, according to Lévi-Strauss, “there is thus no fundamental difference between the zoologist or the botanist who allots a recently discovered plant the position *Elephantopus spicatus*... and the Omaha priest who defines the social paradigms of a new member of the group by conferring the available name *Old-bison's-worn-hoof* on him. They know what they are doing in both cases” [Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 214], and the kind of “knowledge” which they practice by their actions is directed by the system of transition between natural and cultural structures. The name is implied by the system, and the necessity of the system is inherited from – not at all caused by – the natural forces which form the relations between individuals and their species. That means, however, that the connecting principle between natural kinds and proper names is a logical, and at the same time social, capacity which could never be performed by any kind of ostensive pointing in a present moment, namely the capacity of *classification*; “proper names thus form the fringe of a general system of classification: they are both its extension and its limit. When they come on the stage the curtain raises for the last act of the logical performance. But the length of the play and the number of acts are a matter of the civilization, not of the language... To say that a name is perceived as a proper name is to say that it is assigned to a level beyond which no classification is requisite, not absolutely but within a determinate cultural system. Proper names always remain on the margin of classification” [Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 214]. And that he did not understand this was, according to Lévi-Strauss, the decisive mistake committed “by Russell...in believing that he had discovered the logical model of proper names in demonstrative pronouns. This amounts in effect to allowing that the act of naming belongs to a continuum in which there is an imperceptible passage from the act of signifying to that of pointing. I hope that I have succeeded in showing that this passage is in fact discontinuous although each culture fixes its thresholds differently” [Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 215]. It is the sociocultural community which we belong to and its history that forms the scheme of connection between our speaking and thinking and the objects they allow us to refer to and which is implicit in the whole process within by which we make the difference between the true and false explication of all what we know or believe to know.



When we now, at this point, turn directly to the question why this “anti-representationalist” view of the relation between naming and classification is relevant for the social philosophy of science, we will have to bring in phenomenology. The core of phenomenology consists in the insight that all scientific knowledge is grounded not in any theoretical capacity of the total dissolution of phenomena into conceptual representation but that, on the contrary, the relation of our whole conceptual system of science to the world we live in is rooted in our practical manners and strategies by which we manage to let ourselves be taught by nothing other than the phenomena themselves. The endpoint of the work of classification of nature which we are occupied with in all our scientific descriptions of the world does not consist in any kind of logical deduction, but in the sociocultural practices of taking the given phenomena as irreducible factors of all knowledge. For Lévi-Strauss, it was a clear result of anthropological research that the astonishing ability of “savage” societies to classify the zoological and botanical species of their natural environment was rooted in the strictly ruled forms of naming and description in which a tribe organized the process of the original designation of any natural phenomenon. [Lévi-Strauss, 1966, p. 44]. To me it seems obvious that the decisive point of Wittgenstein’s “paradox of rule following” consists in the insight that the rules we are following in our linguistic contact with the world can never be found in any momentary sphere of present, actual representation of external objects in an individual subject, because these rules are embedded in the historical background of our speaking community and in the implicit knowledge about the world which is always already contained in our forms of immediate perception. It would be a very important project of the social philosophy of science to investigate this connection. In our context I cannot do that and will turn into another direction.

I will just remind us of the very important concept by which Ernst Cassirer in his “Phenomenology of Knowledge” [Cassirer, 1957] marked the substance of the relation between explicit and implicit knowledge as the condition of the unity of our living experience, namely the concept of “symbolic pregnancy”. In the development of that concept, Cassirer referred explicitly to Paul Natorp who in his *Allgemeine Psychologie* had directed his attention to the aspect of implicit knowledge embedded in language: “[I]n their vocabulary, their syntactical relations, in each and every one of their components, the highly developed languages contain an inexhaustible treasure of primitive cognitions. ... Cognitions, hence objectifications, which, within the limits of their own purpose, are scarcely inferior in sharpness and pregnancy to those of science” [Natorp, 1912, p. 91]. In his own analysis of this constellation, Cassirer shaped his concept of “symbolic pregnancy” in a way which can be read as the genuine answer to our question about the meaning in which Wittgenstein spoke of the “inherited” picture of our world. “By symbolic pregnancy”, states Cassirer, we mean



the way in which a perception as a sensory experience contains at the same time a certain nonintuitive meaning which it immediately and concretely represents. Here we are not dealing with bare perceptive data, on which some sort of apperceptive acts are later grafted, through which they are interpreted, judged, transformed. Rather, it is the perception itself which by virtue of its own immanent organization, takes on a kind of spiritual articulation – which, being ordered in itself, also belongs to a determinate order of meaning. In its full actuality, its living totality, it is at the same time a life ‘in’ meaning. It is not only subsequently received into this sphere but is, one might say, born into it” [Cassirer, Manheim, 1970, p. 202]. In order to understand this concept of “symbolic pregnancy” it is absolutely decisive to see that for Cassirer the reference to the organic life here is essentially not a metaphorical one. What comes in here is the counterpoint of metaphoric speech, the specific symbolic relation which Cassirer took from Goethe and which is the key to almost all the substance of his phenomenology of knowledge: *metonymy* [Schweidler, 2014, p. 9-50]. What we can learn from Cassirer even more than from Wittgenstein or Lévi-Strauss is the crucial importance which the metonymic relation has for the social philosophy of science. This relation is not the one by which a present act of perception connects the perceiving subject and the perceived object but it is the relation by which this singular momentary act let us recognize the specific *kind or the type of intuition into the world* which is reinstated in this actual moment. “The problem of representation and the building of the intuitive world”: This is the title of the fundamental chapter which Cassirer in the *Phenomenology of Knowledge* has placed before the analysis of the structures of scientific reasoning. For him the “intuitive world” is, in contrast to Husserl’s “Lebenswelt”, not a complement to our scientific world view but rather the symbolic reverse of any perception on which our forming of this world view is based; it is, similar to Natorp’s “primitive cognitions”, an inexplicable system of orientation that forms a whole, a unity of implicit knowledge which we will never fully understand but which is embedded in our language so that we *recognize* it through our perceptions. “This act of recognition is necessarily bound up with the function of representation and presupposes it. Only where we succeed, as it were, in compressing a total phenomenon into one of its factors, in concentrating it symbolically, in ‘having’ it in a state of ‘pregnancy’ in the particular factor—only then do we raise it out of the stream of temporal change; only then does its existence, which had hitherto seemed confined to a single moment in time, gain a kind of permanence: for only then does it become possible to find again in the simple, as it were, punctual ‘here’ and ‘now’ of present experience a ‘not-here’ and a ‘not-now’. Everything that we call the identity of concepts and significations, or the constancy of things and attributes, is rooted in this fundamental act of finding-again. Thus it is a common function which makes possible, on the one hand, language, and



on the other hand, the specific articulation of the intuitive world. The question of whether the articulation of the intuitive world must be conceived as preceding or following the genesis of articulated language the question of whether the first is the cause or the effect of the second—must here be regarded as falsely formulated. What can be demonstrated is no ‘earlier’ or ‘later’ but only the inner relationship subsisting between the two fundamental forms and trends of spiritual articulation” [Schweidler, 2014, p. 114]. I think that we can read this long methodological passage as the key to the understanding of a metonymical relation between the individual and the life of the sociocultural community by which science receives the irreducible basis which Cassirer calls “the intuitive world” and which we found marked by Wittgenstein as the “inherited” picture of the world as the framework of any search for truth. So, the notion of metonymy can direct our attention to the relation between *biological* and *symbolic life* as a key for the task of a social philosophy of science.

## Implicit knowledge and indirect communication

With the topic of the “intuitive world” and the specific role that names play within the transformation process between our momentary perceptions and the act of recognition, i.e. the kind of memory of an inexplicable whole they stand for, we are not very far from the most famous and most philosophical passages of Proust’s *Recherche du temps perdu*. In the immortal “madeleine” episode or in his reference to the “Celtic belief”, according to which the souls of the ones we have lost are waiting for us to recognize them in some concrete singular object of perception, Proust pointed out in the most concentrated form the grounding thesis of his work: that our access to the world we live in is essentially only the one part of a dialogue in which we answer the implicit messages that are directed to us through the symbolic forms in which we need to explicate that access. There are at least two crucial insights revealed in this famous literary vision which, from a phenomenological point of view, should be of highest orientating power for a social philosophy of science. The first is that knowledge is never the static result of a one sided enterprise of discovery, as if an expedition into unknown areas had returned with the trophies which we now possess as the composing parts of our picture of the world; knowledge essentially contains a process of indirect communication with that world into which we have entered and through which we are led by that which it gave and gives us to “know”. And the second is that, if I may speak metaphorically for a moment, the picture of the world which we draw from our knowledge is a picture which inevitably must be painted by us, that is to say: it is a product of our body and its



acquired abilities and therefore a witness of the forms of life that we, as bodily beings, have inherited from the sociocultural community from which we stem.

I can only indicate the implications of and the connection between these principal insights by a short reference to the great author who, in his ontology of knowledge, has pointed them out as the deepest philosophical guidelines of scientific research: Maurice Merleau-Ponty. From him we learn that it is our body which is at the same time the element of our communication with the others who belong to our speaking community and the indirect communication with the world. As he writes in the *Phenomenology of Perception*: “The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body and mine his... Communication is achieved when my conduct identifies this path with his own. There is mutual confirmation between myself and others” [Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 185]. And more general: “It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive ‘things’” [Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 186]. In *The Visible and the Invisible* he refers to Bergson with the thesis that “my body extends to the stars” and he characterizes the reciprocity of body and world with expressions as “reversibility”, “Chiasma”, “reduplication of body and things” and even “promiscuity” [Schweidler, 2008, p. 305–342]. And the element which allows and constitutes the indirect communication of the world and our bodies is time: The subject and the object of “representation” are endpoints of a process. “The chiasm is not only a me other exchange (the messages he receives reach me, the messages I receive reach him), it is also an exchange between me and the world, between the phenomenal body and the “objective” body, between the perceiving and the perceived: what begins as a thing ends as consciousness of the thing, what begins as a “state of consciousness” ends as a thing” [Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 215]. And the time in which this process happens is not an abstract or ideal medium, it is the time of *lives*, or the symbolic life as that time is incorporated in my body and opens my eyes for the meaning of all being which is always going behind and ahead of what is directly represented in the present moment. For my present consciousness the eye through which I enter the world remains essentially a *punctum caecum*, a blind spot: “*What* it does not see it does not see for reasons of principle, it is because it is consciousness that it does not see. *What* it does not see is what in it prepares the vision of the rest (as the retina is blind at the point where the fibers that will permit the vision spread out into it). *What* it does not see is what makes it see, is its tie to Being, is its corporeity, are the existentials by which the world becomes visible, is the flesh wherein the object is born” [Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 248].



The concept of “flesh” (*la chair*) which Merleau-Ponty uses here as the natural *pendant* to his thesis of the “incarnation” of the world in our bodies as the constitutive process for what we call knowledge can be of key importance for the understanding of a social philosophy of science as the *systematic reflection of the metonymical relation between scientific thinking and the sociocultural body as its ground*. It is crucial to understand the non-metaphorical, but metonymic, sense in which Merleau-Ponty speaks of the “flesh of time” [Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 111] that connects organically the surface of our present perception with the history of the speaking community from which we have inherited our forms of symbolic representation of the world to which we belong. If we regard the organic exchange between our knowledge and the world as a way of indirect communication about the ground from which we receive the message of the world which we have to *interpret, not to replace* by the truths we search for in science, then we can understand that the scientific community will find the rules which constitute and legitimize our claim to “be to the world” (*être au monde*) not primarily as meta-principles or causal laws behind the phenomena, but rather as largely *practical* and to a certain degree *ethical* guidelines of the care for the organic unity of the sociocultural body as the metonym of the much greater body of a mankind from which it is still encompassed. The rules which allow and force us to represent within our knowledge its implicit ground may then turn out essentially as rules by which the scientific community has to understand itself as the institution which has been appointed by a necessarily particular sociocultural community as guardian of that community’s responsibility to mankind as the incarnation of truth in the world. The understanding of that metonymical relation between the scientific community and the human “Dasein” can then be even a key to the highly paradoxical but fundamental constellation between truth and humanity which Heidegger has marked in “Being and Time” as follows:

“Dasein...is essentially in the truth... ‘*There is ’truth only in so far as Dasein is and so long as Dasein is.* Entities are uncovered only *when Dasein is;* and only as long as Dasein is, are they disclosed. Newton’s laws, the principle of contradiction, any truth whatever – these are true only as long as Dasein is. Before there was any Dasein, there was no truth; nor will there be any after Dasein is no more. For in such a case truth as disclosedness, uncovering, and uncoveredness, *cannot* be. Before Newton’s laws were discovered, they were not ‘true’; it does not follow that they were false, or even that they would become false if ontically no discoveredness were any longer possible [...] To say that before Newton his laws were neither true nor false, cannot signify that before him there were no such entities as have been uncovered and pointed out by those laws. Through Newton the laws became true; and with them, entities became accessible in themselves to Dasein. Once entities have been



uncovered, they show themselves precisely as entities which beforehand already were. Such uncovering is the kind of Being which belongs to ‘truth’” [Heidegger, 1962, p. 269].

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