

A meaning holistic (dis)solution of subject-object dualism – its implications for the human sciences

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Abstract

This paper presents and analyses a social-practice contextualist version of meaning holism, whose main root lies in American pragmatism. Proposing that beliefs depend on systems of language-use in social practices, which involve communities of people and worldly objects, such meaning holism effectively breaks down the Enlightenment tradition's philosophical subject-object dualism (and skepticism). It also opens the human mind up for empirical research – in a 'sociologizing', 'anthropologizing', and 'historicizing' vein. The paper discusses the implications of this approach for the human sciences, for instance certain parallel developments in anthropology and archaeology.

Keywords

Language, meaning holism, mind, pragmatism, social practice, subject-object dualism

Introduction

The beginning of the Modern Era and the following Age of Enlightenment was a remarkable period of new kinds of doubts rising against conventional wisdom, challenging traditional powers like religious authority. It was a period of emerging attempts to theorize, hypothesize, and test how things are, irrespective of how some authority claimed them to be. René Descartes' (1596–1650) 'method of doubt' was one meticulous philosophical articulation of this spirit: he tried to doubt everything that he possibly could and then build on what remained.

What Descartes famously ended up with was the conviction that he cannot doubt his own existence, that *he* himself is doing the doubting. Everything else was left outside this circle of certitude, was something different, something that one could only fallibly try and understand. So there was a *subject-object dualism* of a subjective mind challenged with the task of capturing the objective world, a dualism which allows even extreme *skepticism* about the world.

Its extremity aside, the fundamental methodological merits of skepticism are undeniable: if we couldn't doubt our conceptions of the world, there would be no strive for inquiry either; scientists doubt and question. Moreover, subject-object dichotomy certainly accords with the remarkably intuitive distinction between *me* and *not-me*. Even the simplest lifeforms 'distinguish' between themselves and 'the external world' – not consciously, of course, or implying anything 'self-like', but perhaps already warranting our descriptions of them as having 'interests' and, therefore, 'points of view' (Dennett, 1991: 173–176). Indeed, dualism and skepticism weren't any radically novel Cartesian innovations; they were evident already in Plato's Allegory of the Cave and in the thinking of ancient and medieval skeptics (Popkin, 2003). Still, there is a sense in which it was only in the modern era (due to various intertwined social, cultural, and economic developments) that these

ideas came to prominence and gave rise to a peculiarly dualistic and skepticistic problematic – culminating in, and now symbolized by, Descartes’ method. As John Dewey (1859–1952) pointed out, there was no similarly central ‘basic’ problem about the relation of the knowing subject and the object to be known in ancient or medieval philosophy: ‘the “subject-object” problem’ – *qua* a philosophical problem, a dualism to ponder on – ‘is intimately connected with the cultural conditions that mark the transition of the medieval period into that age that is called *modern*’ (Dewey, 1949/1991: 290).

The problem has stuck with us: many theorists today presuppose the modern, fundamental, skull bone sanctifying version of subject-object dualism and skepticism – a modification of Plato’s old conundrum where ‘we are trapped inside a cave and know the world only through the shadows it casts on the wall. The skull is our cave, and mental representations are the shadows.’ (Pinker, 1997: 84.) They subscribe to the tradition that claims that our empirical experiences and conceptions of the world are but superficial, fallible, and quite possibly mostly mistaken reflections of the objective reality; at best, we might in some sense approach the true nature of that reality, improve our representations of it, but surely we can never actually reach it (e.g., Popper, 1969; Bhaskar, 1975/2008; Stroud, 1984; Niiniluoto, 1999). The philosophical ontology that most such thinkers propose is *realist* and at least tacitly *essentialist* (objects – presumably some kinds of objects – exist and are what they are independently from what subjects think about them); their epistemologies are *representationalist* (our fallible knowledge-claims strive for representing the nature of objects to the subject(s)); and their metaphilosophical positions are *rationalist* (in that they think that we need philosophical reasoning, painting a big picture of how this all is). They present themselves as champions of the ‘Western Rationalistic Tradition’ or the ‘Enlightenment Vision’ (Searle, 1993, 1998: 1–34), which they defend against instrumentalists, postmodernists, pragmatists, and all others

who would threaten the subject-object dualistic quest for Truth (e.g., Popper, 1969; Niiniluoto, 1999; also Bunge, 1974–1989).

Subject-object dualism has also been a target of fiery criticism in philosophy. One important period in that regard was the penultimate turn of the century in America,¹ witnessing a remarkable *Revolt against Dualism*, as A. O. Lovejoy (1930), himself a dualist, entitled a book of his. Among the leaders of that revolt were the classics of American pragmatism – C. S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey and G. H. Mead. Their impact, along with the Darwinian revolution and other 19th century scientific developments that their work articulated in philosophy, might be dubbed ‘a second Enlightenment’ (Brandom, 2004). Whereas the ‘original Enlightenment’ had stayed true to the old idea of necessities and saw explanation as a matter of ‘deducing what happens from exceptionless laws’, Robert Brandom (ibid.: 2) notes, ‘the new pragmatist enlightenment’ embraced the world of contingency and suggested that explanation be seen as ‘a form of intelligibility that consists in showing what made the events *probable*.’ Pragmatists gave up ‘the Quest for Certainty’ and, with it, the whole subject-object dualistic ‘Spectator Theory’ of knowledge (Dewey, 1929/1988). There was no essential nature of objects to be captured, or subjects independent of their environment – only the world-as-we-conceive-it whose probabilities we constantly evaluate in action.

More recently, (*neo-*)*pragmatist* thinking has been in the ascendant again and many of its representatives have come up with new, highly sophisticated ways to question subject-object dualism (e.g., Rorty, 1989, 1998; Price, 2011; Shook and Solymosi, eds 2014). Meanwhile, as reported by Lau and Deutsch (2014), a recent poll by PhilPapers found that a good half of analytic philosophers today lean toward *mental externalism* – the view that mental contents depend on our relations to the environment outside our heads (Putnam, 1975, 1981; Burge, 1979, 1986). A few even advocate the ‘extended mind’ thesis along these lines (Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Clark, 2008;

Chemero, 2009; Noë, 2009). And then there are advocates of *meaning holism*, which offers to dissolve the subject-object chasm by making the meanings of words and hence beliefs depend on (worldly) systems of language-use (e.g., Davidson, 1984, 1991; Brandom, 2000; Malpas, 2002). These three – pragmatism, externalism and holism – tend to be interlinked to an extent, although it is possible to subscribe to some versions of each without subscribing to the others. The present author's outlook includes all three elements and embraces the support they provide to one another.

The main focus of this paper is on meaning holism and the guidelines it offers for the human sciences; the topic is approached mostly through certain philosophical texts published in the (broadly) American pragmatist tradition along the 20th century. First, a general description of (a version of) meaning holism is advanced. Second, we discuss how such meaning holism, bolstered by an argument from Donald Davidson, avoids philosophical subject-object dualism and skepticism. Third, it is explained why the present author's version of meaning holism – unlike, say, Davidson's – is committed to a certain kind of (Deweyan) social-practical contextualism. Fourth, this contextualism is elaborated upon as we examine how it entails an anthropologizing, sociologizing, and historicizing approach to the human mind and knowledge. The final section then recapitulates and further explicates the implications of this approach for the human sciences, taking particular interest in certain recent developments in archaeology.

Meaning holism

The main root of the version of meaning holism defended herein lies in the late-19th and early-20th century American pragmatists. They had certainly earlier influences, like the *empiricist* tradition, the more radical interpretations of which likewise question the rationale of groping for the ultimate

nature of objects, supposedly lurking behind the veil of empirical ‘appearances’, and undermine the very idea of subject as something altogether independent from the empirical world, naturalize subjectivity as but one part of the world. These endeavours can be traced back at least to David Hume (1711–1776) (see Price, 2011: 318–319) – the ‘protopragmatist’, as Rorty (1999: 67) calls him – but Hume of course remained a notorious skeptic himself, and the thoroughly anti-dualistic forms of empiricism that can help us get rid of skepticism only emerged with the pragmatists, and found fully-fledged articulations with their heirs in the analytic school – Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Dennett, and others – who merged empiricism with meaning-holistic ideas.²

In his ‘Five Milestones of Empiricism’, Quine (1981: 67–72) explicated what he thought were the main steps of improvement in the history of empiricism; and it was a holistic progress where the focus had shifted first from the notion of ‘idea’ to words, then from words to the semantics of sentences, and then from sentences to systems of sentences (ibid.: 67).³ That narrative provides a convenient starting-point for the following examination of meaning holism, too.

A plethora of definitions have been suggested for meaning holism, but the present paper looks for a new formulation. For starters, it will not be tying meaning holism to a monolithic scientific ontology like Quine’s (1953/1961); rather, following Huw Price (2011: 280–303), it will allow for a plurality of ontologies. Also, it will not subscribe to definitions like Henry Jackman’s (2014), where meaning holism is the view that, ‘[t]he determinants of the meanings of our terms are interconnected in a way that leads a change in the meaning of any single term to produce a change in the meanings of each of the rest.’ The present author sees no reason to doubt that a term’s meaning can change without causing changes in all the rest of the language. Further, the outlook advanced herein bears little similarity to Ned Block’s (1998) mental (or semantic) holism – ‘the doctrine that the identity of a belief content (or the meaning of a sentence that expresses it) is

determined by its place in the web of beliefs or sentences comprising a whole theory or group of theories.’ This paper involves no assumption that all beliefs, not to mention sentences, fall within a theory-like web. Instead, it gives an essential role to communities, which Block’s rather individual-psychologizing definition ignores.

Let us start with the following, unassuming definition by Martin Jönsson (2014: 726): (semantic) holism states that, ‘the meaning assignments of natural languages are massively interdependent.’ That is plausible enough, although we might hesitate with the term ‘massively’. Notice that, here, it is meaning *assignments*, not meanings *per se* that are interdependent. Assignments involve activity, so we avoid the impression of meanings in themselves being interlinked – as if in a vacuum ‘cold storage’ like Plato’s Heaven or Popper’s World 3, waiting for people to discover them. Instead, meaning holism (or, anti-atomism) can be tied to human practices, with Davidson:

Words have no function save as they play a role in sentences: their semantic features are abstracted from the semantic features of sentences, just as the semantic features of sentences are abstracted from *their* part in helping people achieve goals or realize intentions (Davidson, 1984: 220).

This signals an unapologetically ‘use-meaning’ version of meaning holism, where meanings are abstracted from how linguistic tokens are (or have actualization-ready potential to be) used by some agents. The regularities of use may be conceptualized as ‘language-games’, played in social practices (Wittgenstein, 1953/1968). In such practices, linguistic meanings are (loosely) interdependent because the use-meanings of terms, especially in assertion form, have inferential relations to each other. This is a ‘social-practice contextualist’ version of meaning holism. (See Brandom, 2000; Malpas, 2002; Medina, 2004; Rorty, 2007.) Its main difference to individual-intellectualizing holisms lies with its appreciation of the social-practical contexts of meaning. This

will be elaborated upon later herein, but let us first discuss how meaning holism might help us get rid of the philosophical subject-object dualism.

Dissolution of subject-object dualism (and skepticism)

To begin with a disclaimer: denying the philosophical subject-object dualism does *not* mean denying the commonsensical platitude that we are organisms in a world that is mostly outside our skins and something that we did not cause to exist; rather, it is just to deny the (usefulness of the) specifically philosophical, metaphysical-cum-epistemological separation of subjective minds from the world of objects as two distinct, intrinsically different kinds of things, one trying to (fallibly) represent the other (Dewey, 1938/1991: 39–43; Rorty, 1989: 4–5). So the present paper will not be suggesting that we get rid of subject-object dichotomy completely. That would make no sense because, first, we *cannot* get rid of this commonsensical distinction (of me and not-me), and second, we should not even *want* to get rid of it *completely* because that would mean denying the possibility of error and hence blocking the road to inquiry and improvement. In that respect, Cartesian doubt, extreme though it was, was worth articulating. In scientific inquiry, we should always try and keep an open mind, remain vigilant, doubt our theories. But there is much more to science and understanding, too, and Cartesian doubt, left to its own devices, is an intellectual cul-de-sac, one that meaning holism can help us avoid – not by denying the everyday conceptual distinction between subject and object but by telling us that there never was any deep *chasm* between what we conceive as our subjective minds and what we conceive as the objective world.

One argument for this view was provided by one of the most important philosophers of the 20th century, Donald Davidson (1917–2003), and will be recapitulated herein for the particular purpose of challenging subject-object dualism and skepticism. The argument goes as follows.

Beliefs, which are central among our psychological states, have *propositional contents*; without those, there would be no *thoughts* (Davidson, 1984: 155–170, 1985, 1991). Or, at least there would be no *conceptual* thoughts and *intelligent* awareness – ‘*sapiens*,’ as opposed to mere ‘sentience,’ as Brandom (2000: 2, 157) puts it. Further, whenever we *explain* or *predict* a system’s behaviour with psychological descriptions – adopt what Daniel Dennett (1987) calls the ‘*intentional stance*’ – we need to assume the system is *rational* in the minimal sense that its beliefs and actions (more or less) *fit together* (Davidson, 1984: 159). We need to assume some *consistency*, that is; and by then we are already assuming that the meanings of propositional attitudes are to some extent interconnected, that there are *inferential connections* between them (so that concepts ‘come in packages’ – are made meaningful partly by their interrelations) (Brandom, 2000: 15–16).

That is to say: the notions of rational agency and rational thought entail a *holistic system* of beliefs. An agent that is not assumed to have such a system of beliefs, according to Davidson, should not be assumed to think (more or less) rationally – it is *arational*; and this is the case with all non-language-using animals, actually, because beliefs require language (Davidson, 1984: 155–170, 1985). Beliefs require language because, most fundamentally, one ‘cannot have a belief unless he understands the possibility of being mistaken’, and ‘this requires grasping the contrast between truth and error’ – the difference between one thinking that something is so and it in fact being so (Davidson, 1984: 169–170) – which in turn arises only in *communication*, in ‘*triangulation*’ where two or more agents communicate about something publically observable (Davidson, 1991).

‘Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content – that is, no content at all’; it takes more than one standpoint to define the meanings of beliefs, and these standpoints need access to a shared world (Davidson, 1991: 159–160). Thus, there is no room for radical skepticism (ibid.: 156). The contents of beliefs, including beliefs about one’s own mind, are not up for the individual to decide alone, because they ‘occupy the same conceptual space and are located on the same public map’ with other beliefs (ibid.: 165). Although particular beliefs may be false, ‘enough in the framework and fabric of our beliefs must be true to give content to the rest’ (ibid.: 160).

These ideas blend well with the externalist view that, in Putnam’s memorable phrase: ‘*meanings just aren’t in the head*’ (Putnam, 1981: 19, also 1975; Burge, 1979, 1986). As meanings are relational, brains process them (think) only as part of our dynamic interactions with the world (Noë, 2009: 164). Actually, this was Dewey’s message already, too. As Lovejoy (1920/1968; 46–47) aptly remarks, Dewey wasn’t so much denouncing the objective world as he was making the whole question of ‘transcendent’ reality meaningless by denouncing the altogether subjective sphere beyond which objects would lie. Indeed, he drew much the same anti-Cartesian conclusions as Davidson later: belief and doubt (or even observations) involve external factors and thus cannot be possessions of any ‘isolated organism (subject, self, mind)’ (Dewey, 1938/1991: 39–40). Only the modern philosophers’ ‘[f]ailure to recognize that ... inner experience is dependent upon an extension of language which is a social product and operation led to the subjectivistic, solipsistic and egotistic strain in modern thought’ (Dewey 1925/1988: 137).⁴

Davidson (1991: 165–166) put it particularly well: ‘the objective and the inter-subjective are ... essential to anything we can call subjectivity’ – just as knowledge of one’s own mind, in turn, is essential to the knowledge of other minds and worldly objects; ‘[t]he three sorts of knowledge form

a tripod: if any leg were lost, no part would stand'. So we have lots of decent knowledge of the world. In fact, 'our view of the world is, in its plainest features, largely correct', Davidson (ibid.: 160, also 1984: 168–169) concluded, precisely because it is formed in triangulating interactions with the world that also give our beliefs their meanings and, thus, truth-conditions.

This sort of 'naïve realism' is such a convenient tool to use in getting rid of skeptical doubts that, as Rorty suggests, even contextualists (like the present author – see next section) would do well to use it: we should join Davidson in viewing our beliefs as 'part[s] of a web of causal interactions with ... things'; because then beliefs cannot 'swing free from the way things are' (Rorty, 1998: 160–161).⁵

Contextualism

So meaning holism could help us avoid philosophical subject-object dualism and radical skepticism. It also tells us something about the human mind: that it depends on language, whose meanings depend on communications, which involve other people and worldly objects. There are many ways to fill in the details of this picture, certainly. It leaves a lot of leeway on the individualism-collectivism and universalism-contextualism axes, for instance. The present paper makes a stand for a rather collectivist and contextualist approach, emphasizing both the social nature and the plurality of linguistic practices.

Social-practice contextualism implies that linguistic tokens serve different meaning-functions and thus have different contents in different social-practical contexts (see Price, 2010: 309–311). But Davidson, for one, would be uncomfortable with this plurality, at least if it was taken to imply even

partial *untranslatability* between sociocultural contexts (Davidson, 1984: 183–198; cf. Medina, 2003).⁶

Davidson (1984, 1990) emphasized the importance of interpreter's cognitive grasp of the truth conditions of utterances – a 'theory of truth', as he called it.⁷ Language community appears secondary to this cognitive capacity: 'Membership in a language community depends on the ability to interpret the utterances of members of the group ... [, that] one has, and knows one has, a theory which provides truth conditions ... for all sentences' (Davidson, 1984: 167–168). Naturally, such a theory can only arise in communication – on this Davidson (1991: 157) agrees with Wittgenstein – but still, this 'social aspect of language', for Davidson (2005: 109–125), reduces to individuals: essential is the speaker's *intention* to communicate something and her audience reliably *understanding* it with the meaning she intended. There are norms ('going on as before') involved in this, certainly, but not particularly social norms. 'Suppose that each time I point to my nose you say "nose". Then you have it right; you have gone on as before. Why do your verbal reactions count as "the same", i.e., relevantly similar? Well, I count them as relevantly similar ...' (Ibid.: 124.) So, according to Davidson, '[t]hose who insist that shared practices are essential to meaning are half right: there must be an interacting group for meaning ... to emerge', but it all comes down to individuals perceiving and understanding others' reactions: 'meaning something requires that by and large one follows a practice of one's own, a practice that can be understood by others. But there is no fundamental reason why practices must be shared.' (Ibid: 125.)

This somewhat *individualistic cognitivism* may be motivated by the noble idea that it must always be possible to view others as rational beings. Davidson might worry that since rationality is tied to our ability to interpret people's beliefs, then if meanings varied radically between contexts we would lose sight of the rationality of strangers. And contextualists should not deny the ability to see

strangers as (at least) *'kind of rational'*. They might, however, have qualms with Davidson's (1990: 319–320) assumption that there is just *one* kind of rationality (a 'pattern ... shared by all rational creatures'); they might suspect that, should there be such a pattern, it would have to be generic and vague enough to leave room for varieties of barely recognizable rationalities in different cultural contexts.

Some translatability between contexts is presupposed by this, so contextualists should not deny translatability. However, despite its centrality to Davidson, translatability is actually a relatively insignificant side issue for many who insist that there are momentous ontological differences between sociocultural groups' *'worlds'* (a term preferable to 'worldviews', which fosters the dualism between one (objective) world and many (subjective) viewpoints onto it); momentous differences need not preclude translatability (Palaček and Risjord, 2013). What some contextualists might want to say though is that, truly *perfect* translations, such that capture all the connotations, nuances and subtleties,⁸ are another thing entirely; they might even be practically impossible in some particular cases – and that precisely *because of the differences between sociocultural contexts*. Indeed, even halfway decent translations presuppose a lot of hard work – especially when the cultures are very different. A good translator needs to be familiar with both cultures and their histories in order to appreciate the nuances of social-practical contexts, and even after all the hard work, having been laboriously trained, acculturated in the social practices of the natives, something may still be lost in translation and what we achieve is just 'widening', or a 'fusion', of different cultural 'horizons' (worlds) (Medina, 2003: 468–469; see also Palaček and Risjord, 2013: 15–18).

Perhaps Davidson is too much of a cognitivist – focused on beliefs and their truth – to properly appreciate the importance of the contexts of social practices (as forms of life) (Medina, 2003: 474). Metaphilosophically, he leans toward the *'rationalist'* (intellectualistic, idealistic, monistic, etc.)

pole of the old Jamesian range of intellectual attitudes where the other pole was ‘*empiricist*’ (sensationalistic, materialistic, pluralistic, etc.) (James, 1907/1981: 11–13). Contextualists, on the other hand, are drawn to the latter, empiricist pole. They might want to soften the hard cracker of Davidson’s rationalistic cognitivism with some Rortian latte of ‘*ethnocentric*’ *pragmatism*. For, adapting Rorty (e.g., 1989), we could say that, although we can certainly extend our solidarity to many strangers and recognize their (sort of) rationality, this need not prevent us from appreciating that they seem ‘programmed’ (by their earlier interactions with their cultural peers) to view the world so differently from how we are programmed to view it that, quite possibly we cannot come to conceive (or, conceptualise) everything quite the way they do. And that is perfectly acceptable because there are many vocabularies and descriptions that are useful for different purposes, in different contexts, and they *do not have to fit into one theoretical picture* (ibid.).

Moreover, some kind of sociocultural contextualism may in fact be needed to make sense of Davidson’s own anti-dualism (Palaček and Risjord, 2013). Given the empirical fact that people do occasionally disagree on some rather basic beliefs (about, say, human rights and their limits, the fundamental nature of reality, the existence of gods, spirits, free will, or fate), and that in general there tends to be more (perhaps even practically irreconcilable) disagreements between people coming from different sociocultural backgrounds, then to make sense of Davidson’s view that most of anybody’s basic beliefs are true, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that different cultures are like different worlds – each involving a host of basic beliefs that are true in *that* context (or, at least, justifiable for that kind of audience) because woven together with other beliefs that those people have found reasonable in *their* social-practical triangulations with the world, while perhaps irreconcilable with many basic beliefs found reasonable in other contexts (see Rorty, 1999: 36–37). Consider the ancients who believed that the earth was flat. That was a basic belief, interconnected with many other beliefs. Yet, from our standpoint, in most of our language-games, we say that they

were wrong about that; for that is how ‘true’, ‘false’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ function in these language-games. But engaging a *philosophical* language-game, social-practice contextualists reminds us that those terms had to perform the same functions also in the ancient flat-earthers’ discussions. For the notion of truth must help people to discern and occasionally weed out some of their few useless (false) beliefs from the bulk of useful ones – *in their particular social-practical context*.

Davidson (see 1990) was wary of ‘pragmatist’ conceptions of truth and wanted to draw one big, non-relativist picture of truth and meaning. Yet parts of his solution, like his questioning of the common-sense platitude that ancient flat-earthers must have been dead wrong, seem open to pragmatist and contextualist interpretations.

[H]ow clear are we that the ancients ... believed that the earth was flat? *This* earth? Well, this earth of ours is part of the solar system, a system partly identified by the fact that it is a gaggle of large, cool, solid bodies circling around a very large, hot star. If someone believes *none* of this about the earth, is it certain that it is the earth that he is thinking about? (Davidson, 1984: 168.)

A rhetorical question this may be, but it points to an attractive solution to making Davidson’s objectivist naïve realism compatible with the unquestionable diversity of basic beliefs: the solution is to say that (objective) truths are tied to social-practical contexts of language-use, which may vary so much that in some cultures people had different ‘earth’ concepts – their beliefs were about *different earths*. Then it is not much of a stretch to conclude that they lived in a different world. Indeed, since beliefs interlock and gain their meanings in networks of practices, the flat-earthers’ lives must have been so utterly different from ours that, although Davidson (1984: 187) explicitly denies *literal* interpretation of ‘different worlds’ (for instance, in the case of Kuhnian paradigm-

shifts), it seems reasonable to say, in a pregnant sense, that they did live in a different world – their ontology was very different from ours (see also Palaček and Risjord, 2013).

When our interconnected propositional attitudes, habits, practices, institutional arrangements and technologies differ from those of others, the world-as-it-is-to-them must be different from the world-as-it-is-to-us. But to this it must be added that, we inhabitants of late-modern post-industrial cultures are such bundles of different stories learned as members of many subcultures or communities that we can recognize ‘different worlds’ also *within ourselves*. Arguably, no one has a truly monolithic, beautifully consistent belief-system. In some contexts, one gives vent to one kind of stories or beliefs; in other contexts, to some others – even to some that appear logically incompatible with the first set. An example from Rorty (2000: 79) is an evolutionary biologist who is also a religious believer: such a person may fail to see any logically forcing contradictions between her evolution theoretical and religious beliefs – she may prefer keeping these sets of beliefs ‘compartmentalized’. According to Rorty (*ibid.*), most people compartmentalize like that. There are social-psychological pressures to making one’s beliefs as consistent as possible, but perhaps we should give ourselves some slack in this regard, appreciate that the ideal of fitting all our stories into one big picture is but a forlorn rationalist dream. Pragmatists see beliefs not as just components of worldviews but also, and more fundamentally, as *habits of action*, and this outlook ‘frees us from the responsibility to unify all our beliefs into a single worldview.... [T]he purposes served by action may blamelessly vary, [and] so may the habits we develop to serve those purposes.’ (Rorty, 2007: 34.) (Meanwhile, of course, beliefs are a special kind of habits that involve propositional contents, so you can communicate your beliefs to us and we may thereby get some information about the world you live in.)

Subject-object dualistic, representationalist philosophers will protest against the many-worlds terminology – they think it important to insist that we live in exactly one world, onto which we have different standpoints (e.g., Searle, 1998: 6; cf. James, 1907/1981: 64–66). But if you believe, with Dewey (1922/1983, 1925/1988, 1949/1991), that minds and their environments are what they are only in organism-environment transactions where, to use Putnam’s (1981: xi) metaphor, ‘the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world’, you will see no point in insisting that beneath all the unquestionable plurality of transactions there must be precisely one World.

Anthropologizing, historicizing triangulation

Davidson’s (1991) notion of triangulation certainly allows larger than two-people communities triangulating meanings: ‘[I]t takes two to triangulate. Two, or, of course, more.’ But two is the critical ‘base line’ for him, and triangulation is presented in very *concrete* terms – as a matter of ‘sharing of reactions to common stimuli’, an observer correlating the linguistic responses of another creature with some visible objects and events in the world, taking note of similarities of responses, and thereby locating the likely referents of utterances. (Ibid.: 159–160.) Social-practice contextualists, however, want to understand triangulation – and the semantic triangle – as an emphatically social matter, implying a variety of sociocultural contexts. That makes triangulation much less a concrete process: linguistic communities are vague entities. The relevant communities usually have no strict boundaries or exact locations in space; triangulation becomes a matter of many conversations in multiple, complex, overlapping, ever changing webs of interactions of (groups of) people (Palaček and Risjord, 2013: 16–18, 20–21).

Perhaps we can put it like this: all (sapient) meaningfulness – and thus truths, facts and knowledge – arise only within language-using triangles of *mind-things-community* in which all three corners and their interrelations are organically *interdependent*.⁹ There were (non-sapient) hominid minds, non-linguistic forms of collaboration, and physical objects perceptible to organisms before symbolic communication came along, of course, but symbols *transformed* them all into something *very different*.¹⁰

This calls for a change in the notion of triangulation, but not all that radical a change – the germ of such a social-practical interpretation has always been there. Consider how triangulation was presented by Quine, who originally inspired Davidson (see 1999: 80) to elucidate language with a ‘tableau’ of two people in a physically shared environment. Arguably, the background of social practices was always at least implicit in Quine’s version, but he did a great disservice to Davidson and to us all by leaving it rather tacit. Case in point is Quine’s (1960: 29) ‘Gavagai’ example where a learner of new language (the ‘linguist’) and his teacher (‘informant’) see a rabbit, the native utters ‘Gavagai’, and the linguist notes that down as a tentative translation for ‘Rabbit’. Quine points out that all such preliminary translations are ‘subject to testing in further cases.... [where] the linguist has to supply native sentences for his informant’s approval’. Sorting out references requires ‘taking the initiative and querying combinations of native sentences and stimulus situations’. (Ibid.)

This suggests not only that there is some *indeterminacy* to any reference, but also that although learning of language begins with apparently simple references to objects and events, the most important thing is the further *social interaction* which allows the learner to ‘get the hang of’ the informants’ practices, their form of life. In fact, most language-use does not point to objects without reason – without any *practical motive*; the purposeful teaching of words to children or foreigners is just one, exceptional motive, and most of language learning takes place outside those situations. A

firm grasp of references can only be achieved by interacting – asking questions, using different words and sentences, hearing responses to them – with several competent language-users over a substantial period of time, in many practical situations; this is how one learns more and more words and combinations of words that fit to such-and-such contexts (and what words *don't* fit to them – are inappropriate, even shocking, or funny, too highbrow or old-fashioned, out of place slang expressions, for those contexts).

Dewey was a forerunner of this sort of view. He referred to a real-life incident remarkably reminiscent of the Gavagai example, an incident originally described by John H. Weeks in *Among Congo Cannibals* [1913] and known to Dewey from the pages of *The Meaning of Meaning* by Ogden and Richards [1923]. The following is Dewey's rephrasing:

A visitor in a savage tribe wanted on one occasion 'the word for Table. There were five or six boys standing round, and tapping the table with my forefinger I asked "What is this?" One boy said it was *dodela*, another that it was *etanda*, a third stated that it was *bokali*, a fourth that it was *elamba*, and the fifth said it was *meza*.' After congratulating himself on the richness of the vocabulary of the language the visitor found later 'that one boy had thought we wanted the word for tapping; another understood we were seeking the word for the material of which the table was made; another had the idea that we required the word for hardness; another thought we wished the name for that which covered the table; and the last . . . gave us the word *meza*, table.' (Dewey, 1938/1991: 59, citing Ogden and Richards citing Weeks.)

What Dewey deduced from this was the contextualist-holistic lesson that there is no 'direct one-to-one correspondence' between words and objects – that 'words mean what they mean in connection with conjoint activities that effect a common, or mutually participated in, consequence' (Dewey 1938/1991: 59, see 1925/1988: 132–161). He quoted approvingly the anthropologist Bronisław

Malinowski's view that, as language gains meaning in concerted human activities, to truly understand it we have to know its users' 'pragmatic *Weltanschauung*' – in effect, 'the whole social context which alone supplies the meaning[s]' (Malinowski [1923], cit. Dewey 1925/1988: 160–161n). That is to say: only holistic proficiency in language can sharpen our semantics, correct or confirm our initially tentative reference-assumptions, and the reaching of such proficiency requires understanding the language-users' social-practical form of life.

Meaning holism and the human sciences

Let us now take stock of the implications of social-practice contextualist meaning holism for the human sciences. To begin with, as it eradicates subject-object dualism (and radical skepticism), human sciences will be on a par with natural sciences in that, in both fields, truths are as much 'made' as they are 'found':

Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot. (Rorty 1989: 5.)

Obviously, subject-object dualistic Enlightenment-believers have found these ideas a threat to the dignity of science. Many felt similarly about Dewey's and James' denial of subject-object dualism, which already entailed that there was no definite gap between 'objective' facts and 'subjective' theories, or absolute, fixed truths; some of their critics made outrageous claims like that pragmatism meant 'believing anything one pleases and calling it truth' (James, 1909/1981: 212, citing a critic).

That was a blatant mischaracterization, of course, because truths and facts for these social-practice contextualists were never up for any *individuals* to choose as they please, but formed in the social processes of science (see, e.g., Dewey, 1938/1991: 481–485).¹¹ Further, neither could *communities* make *whatever* truths they wanted: agreement makes meaning and hence truth, but ‘not agreement in opinions but in form of life’ (Wittgenstein, 1953/1968: §241; Medina, 2004: 364–365) – or, as Dewey (1938/1991: 484) put it, ‘agreement of activities and their consequences’. That is, we could say, truths are made in practices, in light of consequences of actions, and the ‘object’ corner of triangulation is involved in that, too.¹²

Sometimes our triangulations prove that some of our earlier conceptions were false after all; so we should appreciate the basic insight of skepticism, be prepared to doubt any piece of knowledge. But we do not entertain *radical* doubts about *everything* all at once: real doubts arise only with specific problematic situations, and inquiry can dissolve them, offer all the true beliefs and knowledge that we need – for the time being, in this (scientific) community (see Dewey, 1938/1991). So, following pragmatists like James, Dewey, Brandom and Rorty, we should view epistemic authority as a matter of social practice – something to be explained sociologically and historically, without invoking mysteries like ‘the intrinsic nature of reality, as it is in itself, apart from human needs and interests’ (Rorty 2007: 7–8; see also Price 2011: xi). Objectivity depends on community, because it depends on triangulation: there can be no ‘more objective’ objectivity, because there is no stepping outside of this mind-community-object triangle – knowledge cannot become mind-, or community-independent any more than it can become independent from the objects it refers to. And this should be good news because otherwise objectivity would be something *unattainable*, whereas within triangulation we can, occasionally, agree on the objective truth.

Unlike neo-Cartesian Enlightenment-faithfuls who present themselves as ontological ‘under-labourers’ of science, or demarcate real science from non-science (e.g., Popper, 1969; Bunge, 1974–1989; Bhaskar, 1975/2008; Searle, 1993, 1998; Niiniluoto, 1999), social-practice contextualists mostly let scientific communities decide those issues for themselves. They are content with humble conceptual work, clarification of notions – like language, meaning, and mind, discussed in this paper – which they hope will be of some small-scale benefit to science.

Meaning holistic clarifications might help us appreciate that sapient minds only emerged with propositions and, thus, language. Social-practice contextualism further suggests that our understanding of these minds should proceed mainly ‘*outside-in*’ – through communities, social practices, and institutions, which are the connections where language and, therefore, (self-aware, human) thought gains its meanings (and where people learn most of their habits, too, the non-linguistic framework of thought) (see Mead, 1934; Kivinen and Piironen, 2012). This view resonates with such recent criticisms of representationalist cognitivism in humanities that suggest that proper understanding of agency needs to be tied, ‘not inwards to the subject’s grasp of criteria (i.e. ... [to some] mental possession), but outwards to the subject’s accomplishment in the process of human interaction’ (Arponen, 2013: 10; also Arponen and Ribeiro, 2014).

We should not belittle the significance of the biological ‘hardware’ of the mind either, but the kind of ‘virtual machine’ (Dennett, 1991) that human consciousness is, culture is more distinctive to it. Our brains haven’t changed much for the past 200,000 years, whereas our sociocultural, largely language-dependent environmental ‘niches’ have changed greatly – coevolved with the contents of our minds (e.g., Deacon, 1997; Kivinen and Piironen, 2012). If an early-human infant could be brought to our time and raised as a member of our society, chances are that she would grow up to be an altogether ordinary 21st century citizen. Culture gives the contents to the organic activities that

are our minds – which, as Dewey (1925/1988: 221–222) said, differ from the physical structures that carry them out as much as walking differs from feet, or breathing from lungs. Like breathing and walking, thinking also *involves* the environment, a crucial part of which for us social animals is community and culture (Dewey, 1922/1983, 1925/1988; see also, e.g., Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Clark, 2008; Chemero, 2009; Noë, 2009; Shook and Solymosi, eds 2014).

Of course, *interdisciplinary* research is recommendable wherever practically feasible – it provides extensive overall views of the transactional processes involved in minds; Dewey himself spoke for ‘biological-anthropological’ method, and would have been pleased to see it become reality in fields like today’s ‘social neuroscience’. But for many human-scientific studies, neurology-involving interdisciplinary methods are not a practicable option; the general guideline then is just to think of the brain as a part of an active organism and the active organism as a part of larger processes and histories, especially sociocultural ones (Dewey, 1925/1988: 224; see Dennett, 1987: 65; also, e.g., Noë, 2009). A plethora of research problems leaps out from these processes and histories and calls for a variety of conceptual tools and methods. But the problems involving belief-contents are often best approached through analyses of the subjects’ semantic triangles. For the most crucial woof of mind is woven in those triangles, which involve language-using communities of practice and the objects they talk about (e.g., Malpas, 2002).

Now the flipside of this is that whenever we do *not* know much about some people’s semantic triangles, like when archaeological excavations discover fragments of little-known ancient cultures, we should remain cautious about trying to tell what those people believed. Still, meaning holistic ideas are useful also in archaeology. Let us conclude with a couple observations about this.

That philosophy of meaning holds significance for archaeology is not surprising. Like all human scientists, archaeologists ‘agree that understanding meaning is a central goal Where they differ is in their characterizations of and approaches to meaning.’ (Preucel and Bauer, 2001: 85.) What social-practice contextualist meaning holism explicates particularly well is the significance of the main difference between archaeology and most other human sciences – that the former’s objects have lost their original, *living* networks of meaning. The archaeological community can only try and reconstruct that network *within their own*, present-day *semantic triangle*, so as to (partially) ‘understand how people in the past created and experienced the artefact-sign in the ongoing practices of the social order’ (ibid.: 91–92). As a reconstruction, it will *lack interaction with its object* so vital for social-practice contextualists in other fields – like in anthropology, where patient and sympathetic interaction is the kingpin of the methodology for understanding the target world.

Many solutions have been offered to this fundamental predicament of archaeology, and some of them share similarities with meaning holism. For instance, the ‘material network’ approach, which takes humans and things as entangled ‘human-thing hybrids’, seems similarly anti-dualistic and interested in networks of practical interactions; and the ‘material language’ approach, in turn, encouraging archaeologists to read material data almost like a kind of language – as parts of symbolically meaningful, structured behaviours – certainly shares the meaning holists’ interest in symbolic meanings (see Preucel and Mrozowski, 2010: 13–16). But meaning holists might add that, on the first score, the human-thing hybrid talk should not lead us to unnecessarily downplay belief-talk, for instance: the intentional stance is still one of our most potent tools for understanding human behaviour (Dennett, 1987), and should be used in archaeology too, just taking into account the inherently problematic access to the original meanings. On the second score, to compare material remains to symbol systems like language is a stretched metaphor (of course), because language is so different from other kinds of meaningfulness – language alone allows us the unique

combination of meanings that are, on the one hand, highly abstract (not tied to physical objects), and yet on the other hand can be remarkably specific cognitively. Indeed, one peculiarity of language is that it allows us to be both highly abstract and very specific at the same time. The meanings we see in material record are rather different.

A better plan for archaeology might be Preucel's and his collaborators' *Peircean semiotics*, dealing with the inescapable materiality of archaeological record by refusing to categorically privilege symbolic over *iconic* and *indexical* meanings – aiming at an overall picture of culture which incorporates language but also material culture and social practices (Preucel and Mrozowski, 2010: 16–18, 31–34; Preucel and Bauer, 2001). In a perfectly social-practice contextualist vein, this approach allows meanings to vary with social practices (Preucel and Bauer, 2001: 92). It just pays more attention to the non-linguistic meanings; and meaning holists should have no principled problem with that. Of course, to repeat, there are limits to how much can be deduced from material objects about ancient beliefs because the latter depend on language-use in living practices, but material things *can* certainly tell us *something* about beliefs, too – and precisely because they were once parts of the ancients' semantic (and, more broadly, semiotic) triangles. All knowledge of the other corners, in this case about the physical objects that the ancients talked about and used in the practices where their language gained its meanings, help us make educated guesses about their beliefs. The more we learn about the other two corners of their semantic triangles, the better guesses we can make about the third one.

Finally, aside from such methodological points, there is also an important meta-scientific lesson to be learned from social-practice contextualist meaning holism. It is that even in archaeology (not to mention other human sciences) we should keep in mind *the ultimate goal of improving our own, present-day social circumstance*. Preucel and Mrozowski (2010: 3) mention this, too: the array of

recent theories in archaeology that they dub ‘*the New Pragmatism*’ – a meaning-centred, social practices appreciating, and anti-Cartesian vein of thought with close ties to anthropology, sociology, and other social sciences – should strive for ‘more explicit integration of archaeology and its social context in ways that serve contemporary needs.’ Social-practice contextualist meaning holists agree, and for this fundamental reason: any science deals with (explicit and implicit) meanings, which are intertwined with our social practices whether we realize that or not; so in the end, the only alternative to a reflexively aware science carefully and intelligently integrating research with our social practices is science that has blind and oftentimes unnoticed repercussions on those practices.

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¹ There have been other noteworthy attacks, too, certainly. A European tradition of (likewise, ‘holistic’) critique of subject-object dualism started with Hegel – whose work influenced young Dewey, for instance – and runs through Marx, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and others. The focus of the present paper, however, will be on American thinkers.

² Meanwhile, for instance, Sellars, Goodman, Rorty, and Brandom have been so radically holistic that they have challenged the very core of empiricism.

³ Quine (1981: 67) added two more steps of his own: ‘abandonment of the analytic-synthetic dualism’ and ‘abandonment of the goal of a first philosophy prior to natural science’. These follow from holism, too, because it blurs the contrast between the empirical contents of knowledge and the supposedly *a priori* analysable definitions of terms used in the making of those contents (Quine, 1953/1961).

⁴ This view had been greatly influenced by Dewey’s good friend Mead (1934).

⁵ There are decent contextualist arguments, too, against skepticism; Michael Williams, for one, has provided some. But that is no reason to throw away Davidson’s arguments. (Rorty, 1998: 153.)

⁶ More precisely, Davidson (1984: 183–198) attacked ‘the very idea of a conceptual scheme’, or the ‘scheme-content dualism’ – the idea that there are such schemes distinct from empirical content, and pure contents without scheme, the latter cut into different lumps by different schemes. That idea only makes sense to subject-object dualists, so the social-practice contextualism advanced herein is totally unrelated to it (also Palaček and Risjord, 2013).

⁷ We may not want to suffer the over-intellectualizing overtones of this notion. Paraphrasing Rorty (2000), one could instead say that what language users need is just *knowing-how to use* language (including the term ‘truth’), and that to call this knowing-how a ‘theory’ is a lot like saying that we need a ‘theory of bicycling’ to ride bicycle.

⁸ Perhaps a perfect translation would have to convey the charmingly archaic tone of some words, how the sentence brings to mind a particular geographical location or a subcultural lifestyle, the dry humour of a little wordplay, the gripping rhythm of the sentence, and so on.

⁹ Aside from Davidson's (1991) triangulation scheme and some of its developments (e.g., Malpas, 2002), this view is reminiscent of some of Rorty's (2000: 78) remarks and also of Bentley and Dewey's (1949/1991: 8–11) transactional interpretation of the semiotic triangle, making the three corners (people/minds, things/referents and symbolic activity) highly interdependent.

¹⁰ With language, 'all natural events are subject to reconsideration and revision Events turn into objects, things with a meaning.' (Dewey, 1925/1988: 132.) Or, to adapt a Peircean classification: non-linguistic significance consists not of symbols but of 'icons' (similarity) or 'indices' (imprints of 'physical or temporal connection') (Deacon, 1997: 70).

¹¹ Dewey was also cautious enough not to use such 'double-barrelled' terms like 'truth' lightly: as to the goal of inquiry, he suggested that, instead of truth, we say it is *warranted assertibility*. Of course, that can only be achieved *until further notice*: what is warranted today may not be tomorrow. (Dewey, 1938/1991: 14–17.)

¹² That truth should change in time is incomprehensible to subject-object dualists, because for them truth marks propositions that correspond to reality, and it makes no sense to say that, due to scientific progress, what didn't correspond to reality before has now started to correspond to it. But for pragmatists, scientific truths are (problem-solving) *tools of action*, not pictures of independent reality (Dewey, 1929/1988), and it does make sense to say that some tool now work that didn't work in an earlier cultural matrix.