

Challenging the Linguistic Turn: Pragmatism, the Empirical, and Universal Structures of Cognition

Karen Lystra

There are many possible approaches to Murray Murphey's *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge*. But the language of formal logic that is sprinkled throughout, as well as extended critiques of philosophical texts such as Quine and Wittgenstein, is sure to discourage readers who do not possess advanced philosophical training. Philosophers will have easier access to Murray's text, but scholars in American Studies would also profit from his wisdom. I wish, therefore, to pose the question: how can Murray's book be used to deepen, enliven, and inform the American Studies enterprise?

Such a practical focus is fully in keeping with the spirit of American pragmatism that infuses *Philosophical Foundations*. Though Murray's title warns of the book's high-level abstraction, his goal is unwaveringly grounded: to explain real human experience. (This goal is more admirable and less common than might be expected, given the tendency of academic writing and research to explain other academic writing—in a chain of endless regression.) What follows is a brief sketch of four promising applications of his work in the field of American Studies.

Murray relies heavily on the discipline of cognitive psychology, especially the subfields of developmental and social psychology. Given the concentration of American Studies and other humanistic disciplines on cultural anthropology

in the last twenty years, the use of cognitive psychology strikes a new interdisciplinary chord.

The absolute necessity of cognitive psychology to Murray's system stems from his belief in human universals: the second application of his book. Universals have fallen into disrepute, at least in humanistic circles, due to the virtual hegemony of cultural relativism and the insistence on the multiplicity and variability of interpretation in poststructural criticism. Difference has become the modern scholarly obsession.

Murray's rejoinder to radical relativism is a firm insistence upon universal human developmental patterns. All humans, he insists, are innately wired in such a way that certain perceptions are universal: those that form the basis of language and of causality are most significant. These perceptual structures create certain narrow, if crucial, commonalities of experience and of learning that allow understanding across cultural differences. Consequently, humanity can establish shared "truths" about reality.

Lest there be any misunderstanding, let it be emphasized that for Murphey the scope of cultural diversity is huge and its importance incontrovertible. But the universals that lie below that diversity are also crucial and, he believes, can be located in the scholarship of developmental psychology.

Murray reports that infant research has demonstrated that the perception of individuated objects is innate and present at four months old. Objects are given cohesion, boundaries, substance, and spatio-temporal continuity, not by culture, Murray argues, but by innate structures of perception. Also innate is the conception of certain basic causal relationships—especially the phenomenon of "direct launching," that is, one object pushing another.

By four years old, he reports, children have also acquired two other causal relationships: the concept that mental states are real and cause action, (67) followed by the concept that identical stimuli have roughly similar effects on those who experience them—i.e., fire or a bee sting causes pain. Relying upon contemporary research in cognitive psychology, Murray argues that direct launching, certain sensory patterns of stimulus-response, and the idea of human agency are universal causal relationships (127).

Murphey's work vigorously challenges the "linguistic turn," its third application. Though the conflict may be irresolvable, it might be fruitful to debate more precisely the degree to which perception is controlled by language. If the individuation of experience is prior to language, as Murphey would insist, then there is a universal foundation from which to translate from one language to another. Murphey challenges the idea that any human system of discourse (including a scientific paradigm) is untranslatable (233-239). Theories are comparable (and thus not incommensurate) in the sense that they are capable of being interpreted (not a literal word-for-word relation) from one system into another. Murphey would insist that there is no "hermeneutic circle" of completely indeterminate meaning (48). Primary meaning is acquired by all *homo*

sapiens through ostension: pointing to objects that are innately individuated prior to language. “There is therefore,” in Murphey’s words, “an experienced world to be organized that is common across cultures” (242).

The fourth application of his *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge* to American Studies is in the less technical but nonetheless vexed relationship between constraint and freedom in experience. Murphey believes that human freedom is no illusion but is based on our innate capacities to acquire standards and use those standards to shape our behavior (163-164). Again he returns to a foundation in universals. But again he is wholly empirical. Illustrative of his highly pragmatic approach, he asks what is being experienced when people claim to feel free (161). For Murphey, we cannot choose our beliefs, but we can mediate among our desires (156-162). Thus the human experience of freedom is “a causal result of a complex learned process by which we can and do regulate our own behavior” (163). Murray’s book nicely balances the demands of the determined and the free and contains an especially insightful discussion of the operation of cultural rules.

Critique: An Individual Reading

Murray’s work is a challenge to consider more deeply the potential of universal structures of cognition. In a poststructural academic milieu, he is prodding us to give more attention to hardwired cognitive processes. Philosophically driven, Murraey’s system is nonetheless empirically minded, which is what gives the book its persuasive power and intellectual drive.

I have a worry, however. The empirical guts of the book involve infant research in cognitive psychology which has, it seems to me, a major methodological conundrum. How do you establish what infants “know” prior to language? The apparently accepted indicator of infant “knowledge” is the length of an infant’s gaze. Thus, as I understand it, the evidence for Murraey’s crucial contention that certain qualities of object perception are hardwired is how long an infant stares at experimental manipulations. I need more persuading that this gaze is a reliable measure of knowing.

In addition, I am puzzled by Murray’s insistence on the *prima facie* credibility of memory. It seems to me he fails to treat this particular topic pragmatically. An empirical phenomenon, our confidence in memory is developmental and our knowledge of it is experiential. It may help his logical argument to give memory a *prima facie* truth, but it seems unnecessary. Significantly, Murray gives almost nothing else in his book such a privileged position. Even the fact of a “really real” is not a given; it is rather a postulate that explains experience better than any other alternative. It is what he calls the “best confirmed theory.”

Ironically, given the title of the book, I am least persuaded by his last chapter on “Knowledge of the Past.” For Murray the epistemological status of past persons, objects, and events are no different from quarks. All are theoretical

constructs created to account for present data. He says that he classes historical entities and events with quarks and not with perceptual objects such as tables because the historical entities are not observable. But no human observer has ever seen a quark and many observers once saw Cotton Mather. No one alive today has seen Cotton Mather and for Murray this means that Cotton Mather is a postulate, not a perceptible entity like a table. But if human object perception is universal, then it pertains to past object perception as well. The myriad reports of the perceptual experience of Cotton Mather by others, not to mention his self-reports, require a different epistemological status for him than for the quark. This seems to me to follow from the very nature of the innate structures of perception Murray insists upon. The problem of the past is more like a problem of translation (i.e., one of interpretation) than Murray grants. And I believe the most fruitful area for his future consideration might be the connection between past and present perception—that is, historical memory.

I have a final observation. My boyfriend decided to read Murray's book after I brought it home this summer. He tried and gave it up as an impossible task; then he broke up with me. While there may be some logical problems with that sentence, the fact remains that the *Philosophical Foundations of Historical Knowledge* has the power to change lives.