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Jane Duran’s book is an attempt by a modern-day philosopher to introduce insights from sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking into the search for an adequately “naturalized” epistemology: the quest for an empirical—rather than a speculative—account of the factors that influence the formation of belief and the acquisition and transmission of human knowledge. Duran argues that the findings of modern sociolinguistics, though sadly neglected by philosophers, have much to contribute to this enterprise. They hold the promise of disabusing the theory of knowledge of certain old, yet still widely accepted, canards: that knowledge and certainty have an individualistic basis, for example, or that rational thought processes have a universal character.

Epistemology has been inclined toward a type of methodological individualism ever since the time of Descartes. Yet the fixation of belief requires acts of justification that are inextricably tied to verbal behavior; and verbal behavior has an irrefusably social basis. Similarly, it has been assumed since the time of Plato that rational thought processes have universally the same form. Yet numerous studies (for example, the work of Luria) demonstrate not only a high degree of cross-cultural variability in patterns of human reasoning but also that even within Euro-American cultures, ordinary people in everyday circumstances behave in a manner that appears to be quite irrational. Philosophers tend to make either too much of this (when it leads, for example, to the preeminently modern philosophical terror, the fear of relativism), or too little (as when empirically inconsequential models of rationality are adduced at hopelessly abstract, “underlying” levels). Yet once it is seen that the assumption of universality has a normative rather than a descriptive function within classical epistemology, traditionally opposed—and reciprocally incoherent—antinomies such as “foundationalism versus relativism” may be replaced by more plausible distinctions within a naturalized epistemology.

Duran suggests that the breakdown of normative ways of thinking in epistemology has paralleled the breakdown of normative concerns within disciplinary linguistics. In both disciplines, she argues, the early part of the 20th century was marked by a strong impulse toward normativity, the attempt to “purify” language of all excrescences. In linguistics this took the form of an exclusive focus on the study of langue; in philosophy, on the study of reference.

The origins of 20th-century epistemology lie in Russell’s turning away from Bradley-style Hegelianism to construct the philosophy of “logical atomism.” A pared-down ontology (all genuine objects are “simple”; later, these were called sense-data) was united with the first-order predicate logic to constitute a reductive metaphysics: (descriptions of) all complex objects were thought to be reducible to (descriptions of) simpler objects by means of a well-formed logical calculus. Yet the goal behind this particular ontology was primarily epistemological: “[I]f objects could be held sufficiently simple, claims about them would be correspondingly justifiable, and perhaps immune to attack” (p. 87). Carnap developed the Russellian ideas into their most influential form, in order, he argued as well, to stave off speculative metaphysics. But he was unable to stave off the criticisms of “ordinary language” philosophy, particularly the critiques of Wittgenstein, Strawson, and Austin (pp. 92–93).

Within disciplinary linguistics, Duran sees the rise of data-driven sociolinguistics as constituting, at least in part, a response to the nonempirical character of the Chomskian study of competence. Chomsky’s proposal, for example, that the proper subject matter of linguistic study was not a speaker’s utterances, but his intuitions, was roundly criticized by Labov, who argued that linguistics cannot “produce theory and data at the same time” (Labov, cited on p. 38). Instead, both Labov and Hymes emphasized painstaking, ethnographically informed studies of speech behavior that promoted empirical argumentation and a rejection of naively universalizing frameworks.

In classical epistemology, the justificatory process is reconstructed as a series of incremental changes in a belief set—a set of propositionally formulable beliefs—hermetically sealed off from its contextual surround. Duran’s own work, on the other hand, shares many assumptions with current anthropological work on “social cognition” and “situated learning.” She assumes that human knowledge is highly contextual in nature, that it derives at least in part from a process of social interaction. The process of epistemic justification is viewed as a dyadic exchange of contextualized utterances containing a number of nonpropositional devices, such as suprasegmental cues, that orient interlocutors to the existence of doxastic states that remain below the threshold of conscious apprehension.

Duran’s book is provocative rather than definitive in tone, exploratory rather than comprehensive in its coverage. The sociolinguistic theories it discusses are more than two decades old; the modern literature on eventuality in natural language is entirely ignored. Yet despite these failings, the book is a vigorous and engaging attempt to rethink in empirical terms a problem that is as old as philosophy itself.