

Introduction

Many of the important revolutions in philosophy occurred not by taking a step forward, but rather by taking a step backward. The great question that every philosophy hopes to answer is “What are the basic elements of the world?” When it makes progress in presenting answers to this question, it is challenged by the next philosophical revolution, which asks whether the very inquiry about these elements is possible at all. It therefore poses even more basic questions and presents answers containing even more basic elements. And so it goes. The Greeks tried to describe the world, and were so bold as to present definite propositions about it. Then Descartes came and said that before we can describe the world and its elements, we must ask whether we are even capable of knowing anything about it. This question heralded the development of epistemology, which tried to provide answers to this more basic question. But then Frege, Russell and the other pioneers of analytic philosophy arrived on the scene and stated that before we can describe the world, including the boundaries of knowledge, we should remind ourselves that all our assertions about the world are made through language. Let us then try to find out to what

How to cite this book chapter:

Brown, B 2017 *Thoughts and Ways of Thinking: Source Theory and Its Applications*.

Pp. vii–xiv. London: Ubiquity Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/bbh.a>. License: CC-BY 4.0

extent our language represents the objects it is meant to represent, to what extent we are able to say meaningful things, and about what. Thus began the “linguistic turn” in philosophy, which attempts to provide answers to this more basic question.

Source Theory, which I present in this book, is an attempt to take yet another step backward. This theory claims that every datum – whether mental or linguistic – has a source. The set of data transmitted by a particular source or set of sources constitutes a database. The way the data are managed according to their sources is the source model, and all of these are parts of a system. This poses a challenge to modern philosophy, asserting that before we try to describe the world, including the boundaries of knowledge and the relationship between world, mind and language, we should remind ourselves that our entire discussion is within a system, and sometimes about a system.

Indeed, Source Theory is a branch of epistemology, and thus seems to return the discussion to the stage before Frege and Russell. However, it understands epistemology in the broadest sense. Contemporary epistemology enquires into the rational justification of belief, while Source Theory reminds us that the rational system is only one of many possible systems; contemporary epistemology examines our beliefs about the *is*, while Source Theory gives us tools that can work for the *ought* as well. Contemporary epistemology treats our knowledge of language as distinct from our knowledge of the world, while Source Theory applies the basic scheme of the latter to the former as well. As we shall see, it actually deals with more basic questions of philosophical discourse in general, and also helps clarify – and sometimes even solve – questions that have occupied numerous branches of philosophy for centuries. At the same time, it evokes new questions which have not been raised before, or at least have not been sufficiently refined. Thus, although the main purpose of Source Theory is to illuminate the discourse in epistemology, it also has fruitful applications in almost every branch of philosophy. Moreover, it attempts to provide a primary theoretical foundation for discussion in many of these areas.

In addition, Source Theory presents an innovative approach within epistemology proper. Traditional epistemology took for granted a list of belief sources, including “(1) external perception; (2) memory; (3) self awareness (reflection, or inner consciousness); (4) reason” (Chisholm 1977: 122; Steup 1996: 9. see also Chisholm 1964: 245), and discussed their interrelations. It did not account for the nature of a source per se. Modern epistemology has followed the same path, and has kept moving in circles around the well-known debates among internalists versus externalists and foundationalists versus coherentists. These discussions did yield a few important elucidations, but they ignored other important directions of enquiry. The innovative idea in Source Theory is that it takes the human mechanism of knowledge as if it were an information system or, better, a variety of information systems. Instead of speaking about senses, reason

and the like, it begins with the concept of “source” as such; instead of speaking about ideas and beliefs, it speaks about “data”; instead of speaking about experience, deduction and other “belief-forming processes”, it speaks about inputs, outputs, the creation of data and their transmission. This approach may sound similar to the Turing-inspired approaches of the computational cognitive sciences, in particular computational epistemology (see summary at Rugai 2013), or possibly to Dretske’s epistemological theory (Dretske 1995). However, this book takes a much more fundamental and therefore much more abstract and more intuitive path than both lines of thought. It does not presume to claim that human understanding is computer-like. Nor does it attempt to quantify the content and scope of information transmitted to the human brain or explain how the brain processes it. Rather, this book focuses on the formal logic of what it means to receive data and to determine whether or not to accept them as true. Source Theory does not undermine these theories nor corroborate them, but addresses a much more fundamental level of analysis.

Through all these changes, it explicates the concept of source as such, on an abstract theoretical level, while using the four classical sources merely as examples. To reach this abstract theoretical level, Source Theory presents a new logical tool – the Source Calculus – that helps us treat the issue “algebraically”, beyond the concrete “figures” of senses, reason and the like. As we shall see, this tool – the formalist line of argumentation – sharpens the edge of the age-old “infinite regress” problem, and brings it to what we will call “nihilistic absurdities”, which necessitate the adoption of a different, pragmatist line of argumentation.

The pragmatist line of argumentation leads us to a theory that might be wrongly identified, in contemporary terminology, as a form of accessibilist internalism. In my discussion, however, I will not go into the existing literature about this theory, nor elaborate the differences between my version and previous versions of it, nor engage myself in polemics with its critics. The argument, I believe, should stand by its own right and receive the response it deserves according to its own flow from the premises to the conclusions.

Although the present essay is an attempt to take philosophy one step backward, it nonetheless strives to take it several steps forward as well. The backward step is necessary because every discussion in Western philosophy uses rational tools. The rational system is large and important, and can boast many achievements. Nevertheless, it is only one system, and other systems offer alternative ways of thinking, and consequently different data. This book comes to say: Before you discuss issues of any sort, you should be aware of the question of which system you are using, and why you are using this particular system. To be sure, this point has been raised, occasionally and marginally, in various academic areas, especially postmodern discourse, but the issue needs to be placed in a philosophical context and discussed with the use of rigorous analytic tools. At the same time, the present essay also takes several steps forward by using

these new tools to return to old, and sometimes even ancient, problems, and to critique deeply-rooted ideas of modern analytic philosophy. While this philosophy has generally been scholastic and involved in meticulous but unhelpful discussions, Source Theory promises to help clear up many matters and illuminate them with a new light, by considering several classical problems within one unified system. I am aware that this is a very ambitious plan, but I hope to demonstrate that it is justified.

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In our daily life, we often argue about various issues. Sometimes these arguments are fruitful, but at other times it seems that we are arguing past each other. In the latter type of case, we tend to say that the two sides disagree not only about the issues, but also about something deeper.

An example of a dialogue of this sort can be found in the correspondence between Baruch Spinoza and Hugo Boxel in 1674. Boxel writes to Spinoza, “I should like to know your opinion of apparitions and specters, or ghosts; and if they exist, what you think regarding them, and how long they live” (Spinoza 1995, Letter 51: 261). Boxel himself believed that they existed, supporting his belief with the claim that “there are to be found throughout antiquity so many instances and stories of them that it would indeed be difficult either to deny them or to call them into doubt” (*ibid.*). Spinoza, as one might expect, disparaged Boxel, expressing doubt about the authenticity of the stories and even made the almost-modern claim that the words for these supposed entities are meaningless (*ibid.*, Letter 52: 262–263). Boxel insisted on his view, trying to provide a basis for these stories with four pseudo-philosophical and pseudo-rational arguments (*ibid.*, 53, pp. 264–266). Spinoza did not have any trouble refuting them as based on incorrect assumptions and using invalid methods of proof (*ibid.*, Letter 54: 267–271). Boxel, for his part, continued to insist on his view, writing that Spinoza had too high a standard of proof, and that he ought to make do with less decisive proofs than those used in mathematics: “In this world we are less demanding; to some extent we rely on conjecture, and in our reasoning we accept the probable in default of demonstrative proof” (*ibid.*, Letter 55: 273). Spinoza answered once again, this time discussing the issue of the level of proof (*ibid.*, Letter 56: 277–279). He understood, however, that this was not the source of the controversy between them. He apparently wanted to get rid of this bothersome correspondent, ending his letter with the following remark:

In conclusion, most esteemed Sir, I find that I have gone further than I intended, and I will trouble you no longer with matters which I know I will not concede, your first principles being far different from my own (*ibid.*: 279).

It is clear from this correspondence that Boxel's belief in devils and ghosts was not based on the philosophical arguments he used to try to convince his interlocutor, but rather on religious, mystical or occult traditions. His attempt to use his opponent's methods to support his arguments is pathetic, and we can see clearly why Spinoza refused to take them seriously.

Spinoza thought that the difference between him and his opponent was a matter of "first principles". If these principles are axioms, then different principles will lead to different conclusions. But from where does the difference between the principles stem?

Wittgenstein described a similar situation when he discussed the modern debate between science and religion about how the universe came into being. The scientific theory is apparently more reasonable than the Scriptural description, but Wittgenstein knew that this reasonableness is not enough to convince believers in the Bible:

[W]hat men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice-versa. But is there no objective character here?

Very intelligent and well-educated people believe in the story of creation in the Bible, while others hold it as proven false, and the grounds of the latter are well known to the former (Wittgenstein 1969: 336).

Wittgenstein thus believed that the cause of the difference between the two views is a different conception of "reasonableness". While "reasonableness" may not be the right word here, if we decide to use it we come up against a question similar to the previous ones: "From where does this difference in people's conceptions of reasonableness derive?"

When I first became interested in these questions, about thirty years ago, I tended to believe that it is important to distinguish between *thoughts* and *ways of thinking* – that is, between the "what" and the "how". Spinoza and Boxel not only thought different things, but also reasoned in different ways; and the same is true of believers in the Bible in contrast to believers in science such as Wittgenstein. Over the years, however, as I continued to consider this problem and develop my ideas about it, I became increasingly convinced that the "how" can be reduced to a "what" – that the different ways of thinking about things do not stem from differences in some mysterious processes in different people's minds, but simply from the fact that they are thinking within different systems. These truth systems are different because they are based on different sources – that is, different types of objects that provide their agents with the data they use to form their beliefs – or even with same truth sources ordered in different hierarchies. The latter theory does not negate the previous one – there are indeed different ways of thinking which lead to different types of thoughts – but the basis of these ways of thinking is the difference between their sources of data.

Indeed, along with the classic questions of epistemology, the question of the relationship between religion and rationality was a major factor in the development of Source Theory. Since, on the one hand, I have devoted many years to research on Jewish religious thought, it seems to me that I have had the opportunity to digest its internal logic as a system. On the other hand, since I have continued to my philosophical inquiry (including my research on Jewish thought) with Western-style rational tools, I have deepened my sense of the distinct internal logic of the Western rational system as another system. To be sure, one of the prominent applications of Source Theory, which I develop in the Chapter Five of the present essay, is in the field of the philosophy of religion. It would be a mistake, however, to think that this is its main purpose or its main use.

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I did not publish my findings right away because I preferred to support and develop them properly first. I tried to support my theory by formulating it with the most rigorous tools of analytic philosophy, and I tried to develop it by considering its potential applications to a variety of areas, most of which are not directly connected with epistemology.

To present Source Theory rigorously, I developed Source Calculus, which is introduced in Chapter Three, after the preliminary clarifications of Chapters One and Two. This chapter presents the formalist line of argumentation for Source Theory. As demonstrated in this argumentation, the consistent application of Source Calculus leads us to three nihilistic absurdities, which seem to show that it is impossible to have any justifiable thoughts. These skeptical absurdities show that it is necessary to replace the formalist line of argumentation with an alternative line that limits the range of possible systems. This is the pragmatist line of argumentation, which is presented in Chapter Four. If the third chapter can be considered as an earthquake, then the fourth one is intended to give us the tools needed to rebuild the ruins. From this point on, I abandoned rigorous logical arguments in favor of ordinary verbal ones. Nevertheless, as I explained in Chapter One, the self-destruction of the formalist line of argumentation does not negate the usefulness of Source Calculus for other purposes. Chapters 2–4 together form the basic core of Source Theory, and it is impossible to understand the theory without reading all of them.

The rigorous use of a logical calculus to prove the central argument of a philosophical thesis is quite rare in philosophical literature, even in the analytic tradition. Although analytic philosophers created logical calculi and had fruitful discussions about them, only a few used them to prove their substantive claims (Gödel being one of the rare exceptions).

One might argue that if the nihilistic absurdities are proven by a logical – that is, rational – method, this should limit their validity to the rational system

alone; moreover, if the argument undermines the justification for the rational system itself – or at least its absolute validity – then we are faced with a classic skeptical paradox. However, as the reader will see, the formalist line of argumentation has only been used to provide the reader with a bird's eye view of the variety of systems. Thus it is like Wittgenstein's (or Schopenhauer's) ladder, which one must climb only to throw it away afterwards.

The remaining chapters present some applications of Source Theory. As I considered various possibilities, I came to realize that the theory is applicable to almost all areas of knowledge, especially the various branches of philosophy. I chose three of these as examples: the philosophies of religion, law and language. Chapter Five, on the philosophy of religion, exemplifies the applicability of Source Theory to full, "big" systems; Chapter Six, on the philosophy of law, exemplifies its applicability to a "small" subsystem within a larger system. Chapter Seven, on the philosophy of language, exemplifies its applicability to an untypical subsystem within a larger system. However, there are also some other justifications for the choice of these three fields: The philosophy of religion, as mentioned, was one of the fields (together with epistemology) that first awakened my interest in this issue, and therefore can serve as a convenient example of its applicability; law is one of the areas in which the term "sources" ("the sources of the law") has been used since ancient times, in a sense quite close to that of Source Theory; and the philosophy of language posed the most burning philosophical questions in the previous century, which often were too far detached from the problems of epistemology. It is therefore important, in my opinion, to put them back into this larger context.

As mentioned, the first four chapters of the book must be read as a precondition for the most elementary understanding of Source Theory. Afterwards, readers may choose one or more of the chapters on the applications of the theory according to the areas that most interest them. However, it is worth reading all three of these chapters because this demonstrates the broad range of applicability of the theory. To be sure, the selection is not exhaustive, but I will leave it to others to apply the theory to other areas of philosophy (moral philosophy seems particularly appropriate).

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I am indebted to nearly all the great philosophers who have written about the areas I discuss in the book, especially the great analytic philosophers and epistemologists of the twentieth century. I cannot mention all of them during the discussion, as such mentions are liable to interrupt the flow of the argument and make it more complicated, but I am sure that their imprint will be recognized.

Similarly, I am indebted to the many people who have helped me in my personal and professional life. There are so many of them that I cannot thank even

a small minority of them here. However, I must at least thank the people to whom I am most indebted – my parents, Hana and Joseph, who brought me up and encouraged my learning; my wife, Iris, who helped me in every respect and even held discussions with me over the years about some of the ideas in this book; my children, Assaf, Yehoash, Renana and Na'ama, whom I am enjoying raising. I likewise thank my teachers, colleagues and students, from various times and various areas. Prof. Zeev (Warren) Harvey read an early version of this book and wrote helpful comments on it. I am grateful to him as well. Similarly helpful were the comments made by Yair Lorberbaum and Juan Toro, who dedicated time and energy to reading the book and making suggestions that helped me improve some of the arguments. Dr. Naomi Goldblum assisted me with the translation and language editing of the book. Last but not least, I would like to thank Tim Wakeford and all the other supportive and highly professional staff members of Ubiquity Press who worked to develop this book. It has been a pleasure working with you!