

On the Very Idea of a Style of Reasoning

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Abstract

Although Ian Hacking's meta-concept is frequently applied to historical cases, few theorists have questioned the very idea of a style of reasoning. Hacking himself considers Donald Davidson's conceptual scheme argument to be the most formidable challenge to the style idea, but Hacking has set up a straw man in Davidson. Beyond Hacking's own conclusion, that Davidson's narrow concern with meaning incommensurability does not apply to styles, which are not incommensurable in that way, there is the more obvious point that styles, which do not organize or fit the world, are not the kind of schemes with which Davidson is concerned. In fact, Hacking agrees with Davidson, in that both propose we can argue over a topic only when we employ the same style of reasoning (a suggestion which I contend is not necessarily the case). Hacking has a more serious problem, in that he cannot remain a Kantian without justifying his style idea with a transcendental argument. But this kind of argument is only available to those who support a univocal notion of reason, which the very idea of a style seems to outlaw. He has overlooked the challenges which arise out of Arthur Fine's NOA. Hacking's attention to historical detail and unwillingness to employ transcendental arguments in support of his view renders him immune to Fine's arguments against inference to the best explanation. But the list of the necessary and sufficient criteria which identify styles of reasoning cannot prevent the proliferation of (bogus) styles. Moreover, Fine's call for openness in inquiry shifts the burden of proof against Hacking and calls for him to prove: 1) that we cannot understand the history of science without the style meta-concept and 2) that whenever we encounter a mystery, our first order of business should be to stand back and uncover the style of reasoning which makes the predicament possible, instead of getting directly to the business of solving the problem. According to Fine, some puzzles just happen. And there is no guarantee that uncovering the style, which identifies the topic as a topic, will have anything to do with solving the mystery. Not only is there no such guarantee, but Hacking's position, if it is to sidestep Davidson's critique, actually requires that styles play only the minimal role of identifying topics. Styles must be fairly trivial. Fine thinks it is deeply unnatural to view science as entertainment. Philosophers are not to shine their lights on the action and watch it unfold. Rather, we are all to join the performance, thereby eliminating the artificial boundary between actor and audience which we mistakenly call upon to reinforce the notion that the raw material of science constrains our reflections about it.

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