

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### Summary and Perspective

The idea underlying Source Theory is amazingly simple – so simple that it’s a bit surprising that it was never developed before, at least not as systematically as it should have been. Our thoughts are data; every datum has a source; we believe data when they come from a source we have adopted. Different people think different thoughts not necessarily because they have different premises, but because they think in different ways; *what* they think is often dependent on *how* they think. How people think should not be considered mysterious, however. In the ultimate analysis it can be explained as the different structures of a system – different sources or a different division of labor among the same sources. These simple claims ought to be used in any attempt to understand human thinking.

Indeed, Source Theory offers a theoretical model that can be applied to any systematic field of knowledge. Chapters 5–7 illustrate its application to three major branches of philosophy, but the book also includes occasional allusions to literature, anthropology, and cultural criticism, and it can also be useful for many other fields. This broad applicability is neither coincidental nor overly ambitious. It stems from the fact that each of these fields is actually a subsystem that is searching for the truth about a certain part of the world, and the truth can only be considered within a particular system. Therefore all researchers in all fields of knowledge who want to be aware of themselves and their working methods need a theoretical model to explain how they think. In fact, they need the foundation of epistemology as a whole, of which Source Theory is a part, since the goal of epistemology is to determine the limits of human knowledge and name the instruments that enable us to attain it within those limits. The advantage of Source Theory is that it provides clear, simple tools for achieving such awareness and even offers a rigorous calculus for this enterprise.

Since Source Theory is so widely applicable in almost all fields of knowledge, can it provide a foundation for the ideal of a unified science in the spirit of the

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logical positivists? I do not believe that it can, precisely for the reason mentioned above. Every epistemological theory is ostensibly a foundation for every science, but just as classical epistemological theory did not actually provide such a foundation, so Source Theory, as a part of epistemology, cannot do so either. The reason for this is that an epistemological theory provides the basic conditions for knowledge in general, but not for particular bodies of information – it provides a structure but not the content. A unified structure is not enough to generate a unified science; rather, such a science, if possible at all, would have to create its own unified database.

The theory of truth embodied in Source Theory is that there is no truth except for what accords with a system's adopted sources. As I explained, this is not an idealistic view, since Source Theory in its basic form does not deal with the issue of the existence or non-existence of an "external world". Rather, it is an internalist view, as it is called in the modern epistemological literature. Systems that are constructed from sources are indeed part of their users' "internal worlds", and we have no way of knowing for certain what relationship they have with the external world beyond them ("things in themselves", as Kant put it). This is not, however, a reason to deny the existence of such an external world or the plausibility of such an assumption (personally, I think there are good grounds for believing in the existence of the "external world", but I will leave that for another discussion). Moreover, almost all systems, possibly excluding those that are constructed on the basis of idealistic or skeptical theories, assume that an external world does exist and try to represent it as best they can. From this standpoint, almost all systems have at least the object of their aspiration in common.

As we have seen, Source Theory is a branch of epistemology, as it deals with the sources and justifications of the data we possess. Source Calculus, which I presented in Chapter Three, lays the foundations of this theory and provides the logical course of argumentation for it. We have seen that the ultimate justification in the chain of justifications for any given datum is the determination of the source from which it was taken and the adoption relation between the speaking self and that source. This is true of sources as well. At this point, we are confronted with a particular version of the infinite regress problem and the inevitable conclusion that the ultimate adoption of any source (or source model) is always arbitrary. It is this conclusion that led to the nihilistic absurdities. When we are confronted with two or more systems, we have no non-arbitrary way of deciding among them. The adoption of one of them is always just as arbitrary as the adoption of any other. And if we try to find a third source (or source model) to decide between two others, then the adoption of this third source would be equally arbitrary, so that we have no way out of this difficulty.

The nihilistic absurdities actually imply that no thought we have can be counted on to be true. This is a radically skeptical conclusion derived from

understanding the concept of a system as a purely logical concept, like a sophisticated computer program. The pragmatist line of argumentation, however, limits the number of source models that can be used in practice, thus going from nihilism to relativism. In this view, not just any source model can actually serve as a way of thinking, but only those that are at the basis of active cultural systems that have proven themselves as traditions, and with which the individuals who are “candidates” for adopting them can have a psychological connection. Even though we are still left with a large number of systems, at least they are concrete rather than ethereal.

I know that many people will not be happy with this conclusion. On the one hand, there will be those who disapprove of the non-nihilistic relativism that remains and want to find a strong foundation of absolute justification for some system. On the other hand, there will be those who claim that my questions are better than my answers and choose to remain with the skeptical nihilism of Chapter Three. I will answer both of these groups with architectonic allegories.

My answer to the first group is that it is better to build several modest structures on solid ground than one great edifice on shaky earth. My answer to the second group is that it is better to build several modest structures on solid ground than not to build anything at all. Although the relativism of Source Theory leaves all systems in a very modest state, any artificial attempt to find an absolute justification for a system – even though all such justifications have been shown *a priori* to be impossible – does not provide such a system with epistemological strength. Such pseudo-justifications do not really “save” the systems under attack but rather render them unrespectable and leave their supporters without intellectual integrity. On the other hand, remaining in the nihilistic condition is not an option, either. The nihilistic absurdities, like all skeptical argumentation, make it impossible to think at all – not even skeptical thoughts are possible. If you think at all, you do so within some system, and so it is better for you to think in a system that you are actually capable of using.

Some people may claim that some meta-system must exist. They may also claim that not only is it impossible to justify a system outside a given system, but that the same would apply to any discussion of a system; the fact that I developed my arguments within the discourse of rational Western philosophy may demonstrate, they might say, that I myself recognize WRS as a default meta-system. Indeed, as I mentioned, my arguments in this book (above all the formalist line of argumentation of Chapter Three, but also the others) are constructed entirely through the use of WRS, but they are it meant to free us of this system and allow us to look at all the systems from a bird’s eye view, which presents us with all the systems as equals from the standpoint of their degree of justification and internal logic. The WRS argumentation serves our purposes as a meta-system because it is most capable of making us understand the nature of sources, data, and systems, not because it is by any means more justifiable *per se*. The pragmatist line of argumentation, and especially

the pragmatic guidelines, is based on the understanding that the adoption of a source model is a type of action, and so we should perform this action in the most prudent way. Even if this way is necessarily taken from the basic sources of a particular system or systems, there is no other alternative, and so it should be as close as possible to the way we make decisions on most of the issues that arise in the course of our daily lives. It is these ideas that led me to formulate the three guidelines of the pragmatic method (in Chapter Four), despite the philosophical difficulties they raise.

Indeed, the first and the third guidelines – conservatism and exhaustiveness – are very close to our simple, ordinary, pre-philosophical intuitions. They reflect the experiences we have all had when arguing with people holding different views. In some cases, we can see that there are people who share our system, and we can try to convince these people that our views are correct with arguments taken from the basic sources of that system. In other cases, however, we often feel that there is no point in trying to conduct a dialogue this way, because the people we are facing seem to be “speaking a different language”. These are the occasions in which we often say (in non-technical terms) that we simply have different *ways of thinking*. From the internal point of view, we clearly feel that our system is right and better than others, but it is difficult if not impossible to convey this feeling to those who do not belong to it but look at it from an external point of view. We see clearly that we cannot sway such people with arguments from our own system, but that we need to use arguments in which we try to enter into their system and manipulate the arguments so that they seem to be coming from within that system; without using this dishonest method we cannot change their minds. If we do not want to use such methods, we must simply give up trying to convince people with different ways of thinking, and focus on convincing people who share our own system, on developing it, and on making use of all the data that it can provide us.

The second guideline of the pragmatic method – separation – is much less intuitive. It asks us to give up the psychological harmony we aspire to in our daily lives, as part of our desire for ease. It asks us to compartmentalize our knowledge and ways of thinking, which is indeed difficult at first, but provides us with the satisfaction of clear-mindedness later on. Even though our goal is not satisfaction but truth, at the end of the day there is no greater satisfaction than that provided by clear understanding, including understanding the way we think. This satisfaction has greater advantages than those provided by false harmony.

The idea of looking at the various systems from a bird’s eye view may seem tempting to many people. Actually, many relativists of different types, and especially of the postmodernist type, have such presumptions when they preach that we should not judge other cultures by the values of our own culture and the like. In truth, the attempt to look at cultures and values from a pseudo-neutral point of view can only work as an intellectual exercise. You can never remain

in the meta-system for good. Actually, you may never use it for anything other than getting that bird's eye view on the variety of existing systems (unless you decide to adopt it as system-proper, not as meta-system, for the usual reasons people adopt systems). Every person is doomed to a particular system, or to particular systems, and can obtain his knowledge of the world only through them. All we can do is be aware of the systems we have adopted – and then re-affirm our allegiance to them or convert to other ones, but never try to surmount our dependence on a system. To stop thinking within a system (or systems) means to stop thinking.

When we applied the theory to the three disciplines we chose as examples, we were able to investigate its usefulness not only in inter-system relations, but also in the relations between different subsystems within the same mother system. We have considered inter-system relations, comparing WRS with MRS and the various attempts to construct divisions of labor among them. Then we analyzed the ways of thinking in the legal subsystem of WRS by the judges and commentators who use it, and subsequently studied the ways of thinking embodied in spoken language. On the one hand, we must keep in mind that every individual has his or her own personal system – that is, his or her own way of thinking, which is distinct from that of others. On the other hand, people with the same cultural system also have a common real system, together with its common ideal system. “No man is an island” is true on the epistemic as well as the social level, and if we did not belong to cultural systems we would not be able to understand one another, argue with one another, or advance our shared systems.

To conclude, Source Theory is indeed an epistemological theory, but it also bears some moral, and possibly even existential, lessons. We began with a highly technical discussion, but ended up with messages of value for everyone. We think; we cannot help thinking; we think in a particular way (or ways); this way is the one in which we can really think and develop; it is the way we can help our culture and community develop. We should not go too far from our own culture; we should not look for ways that are alien to us and that we cannot really understand. If we want to broaden our horizons to include other ways of thinking, we should look for them nearby, in cultural traditions with which we are intimately familiar and to which we have a real psychological connection; we should continue to think within these traditions, and, through dialogues with their great past achievements and their present members, do our best to add our own links to the larger chain to which we belong.

