Origins of Mind: Philosophical Issues in Cognitive Development

How do humans come to know about objects, causes, words, numbers, colours, actions and minds? We will attempt to answer this question using a range of conceptual tools from philosophy to examine puzzles arising from some recent scientific breakthroughs. The question, which goes back to Plato or earlier, is challenging because it requires us to consider minds where knowledge is neither clearly present nor obviously absent. This is challenging because, as Donald Davidson observes, ‘[w]e have many vocabularies for describing nature when we regard it as mindless, and we have a mentalistic vocabulary for describing thought and intentional action; what we lack is a way of describing what is in between’ (1999, p. 11). To understand the emergence of knowledge we need to investigate what is in between mindless nature and the sorts of cognition captured by commonsense psychological notions.

Two recent scientific breakthroughs may bring us closer to answering the question about how knowledge emerges while also showing that it raises even more puzzles than previously assumed. The first breakthrough concerns social interaction; it is the discovery that preverbal infants enjoy surprisingly rich social abilities which enable them to engage in some forms of social interaction. We will consider how this could facilitate the subsequent acquisition of linguistic abilities and enable the emergence of knowledge. A second breakthrough involves the use of increasingly sensitive---and sometimes controversial---methods to detect expectations without relying on subjects' abilities to talk. These methods have revealed that preverbal infants have sophisticated expectations about causal interactions, numerosity, actions, mental states and more besides. We will explore how these expectations, or the representations and processes underpinning them, could also facilitate the emergence of knowledge. The two scientific breakthroughs are associated with different camps, one Vygotskian, the other nativist. Perhaps for this reason the breakthrough findings have rarely been considered together as identifying twin factors enabling the emergence of knowledge. In this module we will attempt to unite these in a single story about the developmental origins of mind.

The lectures will be organised by domains of knowledge, so that one lecture concerns knowledge of objects, another knowledge of number, and so on. The domains are chosen so that each set of developmental findings is linked to one or more philosophical issues. For instance, research on knowledge of objects gives bite to questions about modularity and the nature of tacit knowledge; research on knowledge of number invites discussions of nativism; and developmental findings on knowledge of colour may challenge certain assumptions philosophers have made about relations between language, thought and perception.

For more, see http://origins-of-mind.butterfill.com