REVIEW

Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) ISBN: 0674013700

This seemingly eclectic but actually interrelated collection of essays presents an epistemological analysis of the history of sexuality through an exploration of the form and function of sexuality in the history of psychiatric discourse. In attempting to stage a productive confrontation between Michel Foucault's methodology of conceptual analysis and Anglo-American analytic philosophy, Davidson makes a valuable contribution to the epistemological debate about the history of knowledge, one that will prove to be of interest to epistemologists and historians, as well as to those generally engaged with Foucault's work.

The book is divided into two distinct but mutually supporting sections. The first five essays are historical in focus and examine the discursive practices unique to the history of sexuality in the nineteenth century. Through a close study of the emergence of concepts such as 'perversion', 'hermaphroditism', and 'homosexuality', Davidson provides a detailed and compelling account of the conditions under which various statements about sexuality become comprehensible in the development of medical discourse. The core historical argument of this first section is set forth in the opening essay in which Davidson charts the conceptual changes in the history of sexual perversion, from the anatomical-pathological understanding of sexual perversion as a disease of the reproductive or genital organs to the more psychosomatic, affective and relational understanding of sexual perversion as a 'pure functional deviation'. The mode of origin of perversion emerges as something independent from what was originally considered to be its anatomical, organic and genital basis, explains Davidson. Instead of being taken as a formal concept, it took on the status of a function (namely, the functional understanding of an instinct), which thereby "allowed one to isolate a set of disorders or diseases that were disturbances of the special functions of the Instinct."[1]

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1   Arnold Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 13.

Although they repeat many of the points put forth in the first essay, the three essays that follow it do in fact provide further historical contextualisation of the aforementioned functional understanding of the sexual instinct—this within a wide range of mutually implicated domains of knowledge, including clarification of 'sex' and 'sexuality' in Renaissance art, in essay two, and the Medieval moral polemics regarding 'abnormal deformations' captured under the rubric of 'monsters', in essay four.

The first half of Davidson's account of the history of sexuality shows a rigorous application of Foucault's principles of 'archaeology', and does not deviate in any significant way from the Foucaultian style and method of historical and epistemological inquiry. It is in the second section of this study that Davidson's distinctive contribution to the field most clearly and most forcefully shines through, thereby even amplifying Foucault's own work. The second section of his study, essays five to eight, examines what Davidson calls "styles of reasoning" and attempts to integrate Foucault's archaeological principles (Foucaultian 'archaeology') with the central epistemological issue of analytic philosophy and philosophy of science, namely 'truth'.

The analytical-archaeological question at the heart of this second section asks, as Davidson clearly states, "what are the conditions under which various kinds of statements come to be comprehensible?" and "[u]nder what conditions do statements come to be possible candidates of truth-or-falsehood in such a way as to claim the comprehensibility of a science?"[2] The implication of Davidson's question for traditional epistemology is evident: namely, that the truth-value of statements—the epistemological criteria of which are set out by the rules of scientific discourse—are not independent of their historical emergence; rather, historical conditions delimit the extent to which certain statements and categories of statements can conceptually emerge, become comprehensible, and therefore arise as candidates for the status of truth or falsity.

Although the philosophical implication of Davidson's methodological concern is articulated succinctly and straightforwardly only in the final essay of this volume (the last essay of the second section), the most interesting ramification of Davidson's historical epistemology is the conclusion that the task of epistemology is to be attentive not only to the *form* or *structure* of statements in their historical emergence as concepts, but what's more—and perhaps more crucially—to their *function*.

> Since epistemology is concerned with these very conditions of possibility, its task is, among other things, to describe the underlying division—truth and falsity, on the one side, and monstrosity, on the other. This epistemological task will be historical, since not all sciences share the same division of truth and falsity, nor does the history of a single science necessarily exhibit an

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2   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 126-27.

identical division of truth and falsity. These divisions may be more or less extensive and stable, but they are neither universal nor permanent. That is why the shape that these monsters take will change when a different form of the will to truth emerges; a new form will bring with it a new division of truth and falsity and thus will reshape the boundaries of the teratology of truth.[3]

Davidson's methodological point thus brings to the fore the notion of *function*, not simply as an historical concept (for example in the history of nineteenth-century sexuality as developed in essay one), but primarily as a methodological principle intrinsic to the construction of knowledge. Historical epistemology as a functional understanding of the conditions under which conceptual spaces become historically comprehensible would thus mean that the epistemologist's task is one that scrutinizes not only the appearance and shape that enunciations take historically, but moreover what they *do*, how they *work*. In what is perhaps Davidson's clearest articulation of this, he writes:

> Thus, between archaeology and epistemology, there is the historical problem, indicated by Foucault in his *'Titres et travaux'*, of how *savoir* is elaborated as scientific discourse, of how a dimension of *savoir* can come to assume the status and *function* [emphasis mine] of 'scientific knowledge' *(connaissance scientifique)*. To go from *savoir* to *science* requires modifications the extent and nature of which can only be determined historically. Specific[ally,] such modifications are part of the history of the relationship between the will to know *(volonté de savoir)* and the will to truth *(volonté de vérité)*. That Foucault could pose this problem so lucidly was due in part to his methodological innovations, to his delimitation and description of an archaeological territory, a territory that made it possible to formulate the question of the relation between *savoir* and *science*, to isolate discursive formations that make scientific discourse possible without determining their actual shape.[4]

By drawing our attention to this 'historical problem' of how *savoir* can come to be elaborated as and take the form of scientific discourse, Davidson (and Foucault) draw our attention to the problem of *function* as the very 'principle of becoming'—what Nietzsche would call the 'will to power'—of forms. Between the archaeological and genealogical axes of definition and their defined, definable, definite entities is an indefinite potential or power *(pouvoir savoir)* that is 'in formation': a possibility and/or a virtuality to which these forms as such give 'form' (see, for instance, Georges Bataille, one of Foucault's favourite forerunners, and his definition of the function in *'Informe'*[5]). The

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3 Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 199-200.

4 Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 203.

5 Georges Bataille, 'The Formless', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 31.

isolation of this otherwise obscure and oblique yet altogether immanent trajectory is akin to what Foucault in April 1981 called the "affective and relational virtualities" that cut "diagonal lines" "slantwise" across the archaeological and genealogical axes of the social fabric.[6] This is perhaps simply the ancient Greek distinction and interrelation of the *ergon* and its *energeia:* the work and its 'work', the work and the way it 'works'.

As Foucault notes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (which Davidson pinpoints as having "extraordinary methodological value"), "the constancy of a statement, the maintenance of its identity through the singular events of enunciations, its doubling across the identify of forms, all of this is a function of the *field of utilization* in which it finds itself invested."[7] *Function* is thus crucial to the epistemologist's task, for it is the relation or series of relations that enables a statement to emerge and be employed (its field of utilization), as well as enables it to gain a stable identity—what Davidson, following Foucault, calls its *field of stabilization*.

> If one fails to reconstruct the field of stabilization, what I have sometimes called the style of reasoning, that confers an identity on the concept of perversion, one will not understand the difference between the nineteenth-century psychiatric invocation of perversion and the appearance of this word in, for instance, Saint Augustine's moral theology.[8]

Most thoroughly elaborated in the excellent seventh essay, 'Foucault and the Analysis of Concepts', the crucial implication of the notion of function as the crux of the epistemological task is the manner in which it constitutes the fields of stabilization of a statement—ensuring in so doing its repeatability while simultaneously constraining this repeatability within a boundary of historical finitude. The principle of function thus establishes that the rules of regularity and identity of statements produced by historical conditions of possibility are "*autonomous* and *anonymous*."[9]

Given the importance of a functional understanding of statements then, it is surprising that Davidson does not draw the obvious and clear connection between his employment of Ian Hacking's concept of dynamic nominalism,[10] Heinrich Wölfflin's notion of 'history without names,'[11] Pierre Hadot's Wittgensteinian idea that language does not always function "in only one way and always for the same goal"[12] and his own claim to have read

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6   Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works 1954-1984*, trans.
     Robert Hurley and others; ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 138.
7   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 185.
8   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 186.
9   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 68.
10   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 57.
11   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 69.
12   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 183.

Freud's *Three Essays* as a "history of psychoanalysis without names"[13] with Foucault's discussion of the "author as a function of discourse" in the seminal essay, *'What is an Author?'* Indeed, Davidson's insistence on distinguishing his employment of 'style of reasoning' from a conventional understanding of 'style' as tied to specific individuals[14] and to individual temperaments, prompts him to define 'style of reasoning' as 'proper names' that "function almost as place-holders for certain central concepts, so that the style of reasoning is primarily concerned not with the ideas of individuals, but rather with a set of concepts and the way that they fit together."[15] Perhaps nowhere are these mutually linked ideas that Davidson borrows from the aforementioned thinkers best summarized and expressed than in Foucault's articulation of the 'author-function' in *'What is an Author?'*

> The 'author-function' is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a form in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class come to occupy.[16]

The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts has broad appeal, even for those not necessarily familiar with the ins and outs of the contemporary Anglo-American epistemological scene. Being myself neither an epistemologist nor a historian (rather, a theorist of political philosophies), what remains most exciting and even *inciting* about this collection of essays is not simply its author's intended subject matter, but rather its *manner*, its *function* as a 'work'. Although Davidson himself never mentions it, over and above his attention to Foucaultian methodological rigueur, this work struggles with, exemplifies and articulates that most elusive of Foucaultian ideas (a Foucaultian notion often mentioned in literary debates): the *function* of discourse — specifically in relation to the 'author' as a function of discourse. Davidson's command of Foucault's most difficult ideas, as well as his capacity "to pick up the spear and throw it onward from the point where [Foucault] had left it" (echoing a phrase from Nietzsche's *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*[17]), compels me to consider not only

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13   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 89.

14   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 126.

15   Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 127.

16   Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 130-1.

17   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1962), 30.

what this book is *about*, but even more importantly what the book, as a 'work', *does*. Function plays a conspicuous conceptual role in Davidson's analysis of the history of psychiatric discourse, and an equally prominent part as a methodological principle in his work. The most interesting and compelling aspect of this work, as such, in this reviewer's opinion, is Davidson's struggle in his examination of the history of nineteenth- century sexuality to articulate the notion of *function* as a methodologically and philosophically discursive principle.

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