



A Toolkit for Travelling Facts

Introduction

These are notes collected from meetings of the Leverhulme/ESRC funded project “How Well Do ‘Facts’ Travel?” at LSE’s department of economic history. The project is not concerned with defining what constitutes a “fact,” but with looking at where and how facts travel and at what has happened to the facts in the process of this migration. Of course, however much we try to avoid or deflect the issue, questions about what counts as a “fact” will be asked. When they are, we will answer them with something like: What we call “facts” are just those pieces of information that are privileged as being true among the community that uses them. The advantages of a definition along these lines is that it doesn’t assume an external, transcultural or transhistorical position with respect to the epistemic value of the “facts.” It allows us to be agnostic about the truth value of the subject matter, without requiring that we be either relativistic or realistic about truth itself. We think of the relation between facts and truth in much the same way as we might think of the relation between laws and justice. So we hope that we can get on with the business of looking at how well a fact travels without getting too entangled in epistemological questions.

The following notes deal with some of the ways in which facts might be thought to travel. The first section looks at the idea of tacit and explicit knowledge. How might facts travel tacitly, that is, without explicit formulation? “Tacit” knowledge can be understood in several ways: as knowledge that might be expressed (perhaps laboriously) in propositional form but for various reasons (illiteracy, innumeracy, efficiency) has not been so expressed. Alternatively, a stronger version claims that tacit knowledge is that type of knowledge which cannot be expressed in propositional form, no matter how exhaustive the description. Will adopting one or another of these two readings affect the way we think of facts travelling? What disagreements and arguments might be rooted in such concealed assumptions?

The second part looks at a mechanism of travel that substitutes facts for entities of its own making: “memes.” A meme is a unit of cultural selection by analogy with the gene as the unit of evolutionary selection. Memes are an increasingly popular way to talk about cultural

transmission. What advantages are there to adopting this new terminology, and to whom? What consequences are there of using the new word?

The third part looks at metaphor, one way in which the language which facilitates travelling facts also affects the facts that travel. Scholars today approach metaphor not simply as a poetic garnish, but as constitutive of the way in which people think. Some neuroscientists now suggest that the structure of metaphors (and what used to be no more than “figures of speech”) goes all the way down to how the brain processes information. Different metaphors carry different types of information, enabling and emphasising certain types of transfer whilst hampering and inhibiting others.

By no means do these notes sum to an exhaustive account of the mechanisms by which facts might travel. A better sense of what types of conceptual apparatus the project is open to exploring can be found by looking at the working papers series. It is hoped that new sections will eventually be added on information theory, on narrative, on how models, graphs, and illustrations carry facts, on how well numerical facts travel, and more, contributing to a theoretical toolkit for working with travelling facts.