

**Quentin Smith, ed.**

*Epistemology: New Essays.*

New York: Oxford University Press 2008.

330 pages

US\$129.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-926493-3)

US\$40.00 (paper ISBN 978-0-19-926494-0)

This volume puts together twelve new essays by scholars who have done groundbreaking work in epistemology over the past four decades. Unfortunately, the editor's brief introduction offers only a sketchy presentation of the papers and their background. Given the variety and complexity of the issues tackled, one would have expected a more detailed account of the nature and developments of the epistemological theories and arguments put forward and discussed by the contributors. The absence of such an account is all the more surprising considering that the editor does not himself contribute a paper to the volume.

The first two papers challenge orthodox or prevailing epistemological positions. In 'Knowledge Needs No Justification', Hilary Kornblith recognizes that justification is a key epistemic notion, but rejects the standard view that justification is a necessary condition for knowledge. He argues that dialectical accounts of justification fail to provide us with such a condition because their conception of justification is highly subjective. For their part, more objective conceptions of justification seem to have little to do with justification insofar as they set justificatory standards beyond human reach.

In 'Useful False Beliefs', Peter Klein counters the common view that false beliefs play no (essential) role in the justification of beliefs and the causal production of knowledge. After describing cases in which false beliefs seem to play such a role, he explains that in all those cases 'S arrives at knowledge because, although the false belief produces the cognition (that is, the false belief doxastically justifies the cognition), there is a true proposition that is *closely related* to the false one which is such that it propositionally justifies the known proposition, and, were S to have believed it, S could have employed that belief doxastically to justify the cognition' (47), and there is no genuine defeater of the justification of the true proposition (57). Klein claims his account of useful falsehoods should be acceptable to both defeasibility theorists and reliabilists.

Alvin Goldman, in 'Immediate Justification and Process Reliabilism', considers the puzzles raised by the foundationalist notion of immediate or direct justification, critically examines the solutions offered by some epistemologists who propose internalist accounts of justification, and argues that his own version of reliabilism (i.e., process reliabilism) provides the best available solution to those problems. According to Goldman, what makes certain beliefs immediately justified is their being the spontaneous result of the application of cognitive processes that are generally reliable, i.e., truth-conductive.

In their contribution, 'Evidence', Earl Conee and Richard Feldman embrace a strong form of evidentialism according to which evidence is what necessarily justifies belief under every possible circumstance. Their purpose is to clarify the nature of evidence and evidential support. They define evidence as the information or data a person has at a given time to go on forming beliefs, and conceive of it as justifying evidence, so that a person who has no reason to believe a given proposition has no evidence for it. They reject the view that only believed propositions can be part of one's evidence, since they accept that experiences can be evidence and that, in fact, all ultimate evidence is experiential, so that beliefs are evidence only derivatively. Experiential evidence stops the regress of justification because it justifies belief in a proposition without needing justification. As for the evidential support relation, experiences justify propositions when these propositions are part of the best available explanation of those experiences.

The justification of perceptual beliefs is the subject of Anthony Brueckner's 'Experimental Justification'. After offering a useful taxonomy of theories of justification, he discusses some accounts of perceptual justification, in particular that proposed by James Pryor. Brueckner defends the thesis that 'perceptual beliefs are justified in virtue of their relation to propositional-content-bearing experiences' (105), but maintains (*contra* Pryor) that these perceptual experiences cannot be used to rule out skeptical scenarios. The reason is that the denial of such scenarios (such as 'I am not a brain in a vat') is clearly not a part of the propositional content of those experiences.

In his 'Skepticism and Perceptual Knowledge', Ernest Sosa examines the skeptical dream argument, which poses a more serious problem than the brain-in-a-vat or the evil demon scenarios, and for which he presents two solutions. The first is that dreams do not contain beliefs, but are like imaginings or stories, so that they do not threaten the safety of our perceptual beliefs. The second is that, even if we accept that we do have perceptual beliefs in our dreams, the dream argument does not deprive us of knowledge understood as apt belief, i.e., a belief which is 'correct in virtue of manifesting the believer's epistemic competence exercised in its appropriate conditions' (135). The reason is that, when we dream, the conditions are not appropriate for the exercise of our perceptual competence. I have just two remarks. First, I think a radical skeptic would ask both how we can determine what conditions are appropriate and on what basis we can say that certain dispositions are cognitive virtues which as such are truth-conducive. My second remark is historical: at one point, Sosa claims that Pyrrhonian and Academic skepticism are less problematic than dream skepticism, forgetting or simply ignoring that the Academic skeptics did use the case of dreams to argue that every true perceptual impression or appearance is such that some false one just like it is possible.

'Knowledge-Closure and Skepticism', by Marian David and Ted Warfield, carefully explores the skeptical arguments which, taking knowledge-closure principles as one of their premises, are intended to lead to general skepticism about knowledge. They

first analyze the knowledge-closure principles that have been traditionally used in skeptical arguments and conclude that they pose insurmountable difficulties. They then examine several other knowledge-closure principles that could be formulated in replacement of the traditional ones, but conclude that these principles, albeit being more plausible, also pose serious problems that cannot be solved. Given this situation, they affirm that knowledge-closure-based skeptical arguments are unsound.

Next, in ‘Intuition and Modal Error’, George Bealer defends the method of intuition-driven philosophical investigation against skeptical accounts of modal intuitions. He recognizes that modal intuitions are fallible, but claims that erroneous modal intuitions can in principle be identified and eliminated by a properly conducted *a priori* dialectic, so that there is no reason to reject them as a source of evidence. Bealer inventories several sources of modal error, focusing on two which have been either widely misunderstood or completely ignored in the literature: namely, the failure to distinguish between metaphysical and epistemic possibility, and the local (i.e., partial and temporary) misunderstanding of one’s concepts. He claims that confusion regarding these two sources has led to skepticism about modal intuitions and that this stance is self-defeating, the reason being that, without those intuitions, skeptical arguments against the evidential status of modal intuitions would lose their basis.

In ‘Rational Disagreement as a Challenge to Practical Ethics and Moral Theory: An Essay in Moral Epistemology’, Robert Audi defends ethical intuitionism against the challenge posed by the existence of moral disagreements. First, that certain moral principles are self-evident does not imply that they are obvious, so that agreement on them is not always possible either immediately or even after some discussion. Second, even if there is not much doctrinal agreement, there is widespread agreement in moral practice, which is best explained by the ethical intuitionist’s view that certain principles are self-evident and true. Third, rational disagreement may lead not to suspension of judgment, but to a kind of non-doxastic acceptance which Audi conceives of as intermediate between suspension of judgment and belief. Finally, it is much more difficult than is usually thought to have evidence that disagreeing parties are epistemically on a par, i.e., are equally rational and equally well-informed. This paper will be of interest not only to those familiar with the use of the argument from disagreement in ethics, but also to those engaged in the current lively debate about the epistemic significance of disagreement.

In the next paper, ‘Irrationality and Cognition’, John Pollock proposes to throw light on rationality by exploring the reason it is possible for humans to be irrational. The answer is found in a localized flaw in our cognitive design, namely, in an evolutionary failure to merge two cognitive mechanisms: evaluative conditioning and explicit reasoning about expected values. There are various shortcut procedures which are an important part of our cognitive structure insofar as they allow us to make quick decisions in unpredictable environments, as explicit reasoning is too slow and requires too much

experience of the world. Pollock claims that epistemic irrationality ultimately derives from practical irrationality, and that the latter is the result of our occasional failure to override shortcut procedures in our decision making even though we have the necessary information to do so. The paradigmatic case is that of the compulsive smoker who is aware of the negative effects of smoking.

In his highly technical ‘Why Epistemology Cannot be Operationalized’, Timothy Williamson targets ‘operational epistemology’. This is defined as the view that attempts to provide enquirers with a method for believing what is true, a method being ‘a set of rules such that one is, at least in principle, always in a position to know whether one is complying with them’ (279). This view therefore presupposes that certain conditions are ‘luminous’, which means that whenever the conditions obtain one is in a position to know that they obtain. Williamson rejects the idea that there are non-trivial luminous conditions, a view already defended in his *Knowledge and its Limits* (OUP, 2000). In the present paper he purports to show that the anti-luminosity argument he (successfully) applied to the concept of knowledge in the aforementioned book can also be (successfully) applied to the concept of probability.

The final paper ‘Epistemology Dehumanized’, by Panayot Butcharov, explores three kinds of epistemology, namely, naturalistic, subjective, and epistemology-as-logic. The main thesis of the essay is that the first two, which are the standard varieties of epistemology, pose certain problems that are avoided by the third. Naturalistic epistemology restricts its analysis to humans and their epistemic states, and so lacks the generality and abstraction characteristic of philosophical thinking. In addition, given that its subject matter is in fact the subject matter of certain disciplines such as biology, psychology, and neurology, the question arises what room is left for naturalistic philosophy. For its part, subjective epistemology attempts, unlike the naturalistic variety, to answer the skeptical challenge and is therefore concerned with ‘whether, how, and what knowledge is possible for *me*, abstracting for the fact that I am human, and ignoring you and Jack’ (304). The result is that, although it enjoys the abstraction distinctive of philosophy, it lacks generality altogether and cannot therefore be a theory. The reason is that it is restricted to the indexical term ‘I’ but without presupposing reference to anything and thus having no subject matter. As for epistemology-as-logic, its subject matter is the validity or cogency of non-formal inferences (independently of their possible use against skepticism). Thus it enjoys the generality and abstraction of philosophy, and it is ‘dehumanized’ because it does not deal with inferences as human activities.

All in all, this is an excellent collection of epistemological essays by leading experts in the field.

**Diego E. Machuca**

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (Argentina)