

Robert Pasnau. *After Certainty: A History of Our Epistemic Ideals and Illusions.* Oxford University Press 2018. 400 pp. \$74.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780198801788).

In a work of remarkable scope and depth, Robert Pasnau's *After Certainty: A History of Our Epistemic Ideals and Illusions* is a perceptive and timely analysis of what epistemology has been and an argument for what epistemology should be. Pasnau identifies the historically dominant framework as *idealized epistemology*, a theory of knowledge that 'aspires, first, to describe the epistemic ideal that human beings might hope to achieve, and then, second, to chart the various ways in which we commonly fall off from that ideal' (3). A major character in this story is the ideal of certainty, but he also examines fidelity and reliability in order to show how these ideals slowly gave way to the contemporary framework of *threshold epistemology*, which is concerned primarily with when a person meets a threshold that 'divides knowledge from mere true belief' (9).

The unique format of the book is worth noting. The primary text was first presented as the Isaiah Berlin Lectures on the History of Ideas at Oxford in 2014. These six lectures are followed by extensive endnotes, longer than the lectures themselves, and full of context, extended explanations, and useful references (139-336). This arrangement gives the reader the option of working through the content at various levels of detail. This review, however, focuses on the primary text.

The first lecture lays out the frameworks of *idealized epistemology* and *threshold epistemology*. It then begins to trace the development of the epistemic concepts *epistēmē* and *scientia* from their origin in Aristotle's ideal of understanding causes or essences of things, through their gradual replacement by a program that emphasizes detailed description and the precision of mathematics. Pasnau argues that 'the scientific revolution begins from a revolution in our cognitive expectations' (18), for instance through the work of Descartes, Galileo, and Newton. The story here is that the scientific revolution paralleled a slow but inexorable rise of precision as the dominant paradigm in Anglo-American philosophy.

In Lecture Two, Pasnau begins to examine in detail the cognitive ideal of certainty. He begins with an examination of Descartes's ideal theory that focuses on *scientia*. The discussion of *scientia* gets picked up again in Lecture Five, in defense of Descartes against accusations of circularity, and is also addressed in detail in the notes to Lecture Two. These sections ought to be required reading for anyone with an interest in Cartesian epistemology, as here the discontinuities between Descartes's concerns and those of contemporary epistemologists are striking. Pasnau argues that it would be a mistake to view Descartes's preoccupation with *scientia* as an interest in knowledge per se. He then contrasts Descartes's idealized epistemology with the views of John Buridan and John Locke, in a story of the transition from *evidentness* ('intellectual compulsion in the face of an evident truth') to *evidence* ('epistemic permission in view of what is sufficiently probable') (35). Here we get closest to a diagnosis of what ails epistemology: 'The principle of proportionality [believe in proportion with one's evidence] seems incontrovertible as a normative principle—it is how rational beings ought to conduct themselves. And still, even in the absence of certainty, we want to believe, and cannot help but believe. Hence the epistemologist is forever unsatisfied, in need of certainty but unable to have it' (45).

Lectures Three and Four take up what Pasnau calls 'the domain of sensory privilege': the *external* (Lecture Three) and the *internal* (Lecture Four). Again, things begin with Aristotle, this time with his perceptual relationalism, where sensory qualities obtain only relationally (e.g., sound exists only relation to a hearer). The question of interest here is why seventeenth century philosophers did not accept relationalism or reductivism, but instead developed the famous 'way of ideas,' the

view that the objects of perception are ideas in the mind, rather than things in out in the world. Pasnau recognizes two guiding epistemic ideals: *reliability*, ‘a sense’s signaling the presence of a quality closely correlates with that quality’s presence,’ and *fidelity*, ‘the senses should tell us something about the character of what we perceive: not just that a certain quality is present to us, but *what* that quality is like’ (66). These two ideals constrained and directed seventeenth century epistemology in significant, yet problematic, ways, but they are important for understanding why the way of ideas seemed a plausible alternative. These chapters include interesting discussions of Augustine, arguments from illusion, John Duns Scotus’s disjunctivism, Auriol’s doctrine of apparent being, and Autrecourt’s Platonism. The takeaway, however, is that we have learned to live with a lack of perceptual fidelity, in regard to both the external world and the mind. This point sets the stage for Pasnau’s later argument that we must dispense with the epistemic ideal of certainty.

In Lecture Five, Pasnau addresses first-person authority of ‘how things seem at the present time’ (95), or what he calls the ‘me-now.’ Pasnau places Anselm’s epistemology (the ‘Anselmian glance’) alongside a discussion of memory in recent cognitive science, and argues that the privileged status Descartes gave to the ‘me-now’ is an unsupported cognitive bias, a dogmatic assertion that is merely descriptive, not normative. It is Hume who de-privileges this first-person authority and reason itself, turning to ‘carelessness and inattention’ as ‘the sole “remedy” against skepticism’ (113). One wonders here about the relevance of this discussion of first-person authority for contemporary accounts of self-knowledge, as the scope of Pasnau’s notion of first-person authority seems distinct from first-person authority understood as a special kind of access one has to one’s own mental states. This issue becomes important in Lecture Six.

Pasnau’s original claim that epistemology is alienated from its history suggests that the history of epistemology will provide insight to contemporary problems. With that in mind, Lecture Six is a bit of a letdown, for after a stunningly perceptive tour through the history of the epistemic ideal of certainty, this history plays a surprisingly small role in Pasnau’s positive proposal. Here Pasnau argues that certainty eludes us as a matter of logic. First, he presents a somewhat idiosyncratic argument from John of Mirecourt which puts forward the view that there is a limit on God’s ability to deceive us. The second argument is a more substantial one that no being can achieve perfect certainty, not even a cognitively perfect being (God). The argument is roughly this: a being that is ‘cognitively ideal in every respect’ (122) cannot simply believe that he or she is cognitively ideal, for someone insane might satisfy this criterion. The being must have good reasons for doing so. But a God-sized version of the evil demon scenario would prevent such a being from having sufficient reason to think that he or she is cognitively ideal. Thus, not even God can have ideal certainty.

Someone inclined to resist this conclusion could simply reject the assumption that a cognitively perfect being requires reasons in order to have self-knowledge of its own cognitive perfection. Here is where the question about first-person authority in Lecture Five becomes relevant. One of the striking features of a prominent view of first-person authority is that it is a kind of self-knowledge that is not based on reasons in any ordinary sense of the term. Pain is a common example: I do not have or need a reason to think I am in pain when I stub my toe. This is not dogmatism, but rather the description of a kind of self-awareness that is not achieved or sustained through reasoning. In order for Pasnau to show that not even God could achieve the ideal of certainty, he needs to show why God’s does not have this kind of first-person authority, and his discussion in Chapter 5 does not clarify matters sufficiently here.

More importantly, Pasnau concludes that if not even God can have ideal certainty, we should reject certainty as an epistemic ideal. The rejection of certainty is well-traveled territory; what’s new here is the suggestion that *hope* should play a substantial epistemological role of regulating our

beliefs, alongside a simultaneous sober acknowledgement of our cognitive limitations that regulates our credences. Here again Pasnau finds solidarity with Hume, who Pasnau interprets as settling for a sort of quietism. But unlike Hume, Pasnau does not think we need to settle for an epistemology of naturalistic explanations and descriptions. He argues that normative epistemology can be preserved by having hope, which he describes as ‘an optimism on the affective side’ (138). Hope is more robust than Hume’s cheerful skepticism, for Pasnau thinks that belief can result from (properly constrained) hope, while one’s credences remain responsive to the evidence (here the situation is dismal). It’s a bit of a mystery how all this is supposed to work, especially since evidence does not do the proper constraining.

Nevertheless, this work is a monumental achievement that is illuminating in its own right and that also opens up many possibilities for further inquiry. Pasnau more than adequately demonstrates that the effort to get back in touch with the history of epistemology is well worth it.

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