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Review of “Epistemology, A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge”

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Book Note

Epistemology, A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge, by Robert Audi. Routledge 2003 (second edition) xvi + 352 pages. ISBN 0-415-28108-3 (HBK), ISBN 0-415-28109-1

Reading this book is a little like taking a leisurely walk with a friend who insists on smelling the flowers and chatting away. It is a very pleasant feeling, if you are not in much of a hurry to get anywhere. Indeed the author warns us, "Any one chapter can perhaps be read at a sitting, but experience has shown that even the shortest chapter contains too many concepts and positions for most readers to assimilate in a single reading..." I am not convinced that the density of the material is the issue here, but rather the author's leisurely style.

The book is not meant as an introduction to the literature of epistemology, but rather to be an introduction to the field itself. It consists of an introduction, plus three parts, of five, two, and four chapters (including the conclusion) respectively.

Part one has five chapters devoted respectively to *perception, memory, consciousness, reason and testimony*, and was reminiscent, at least to this reader, of *Indian logic* which tends to mix epistemology with what we would consider logic proper. The two chapters of part two are devoted respectively to *inference* and the *extension of knowledge*, and to the *architecture of knowledge*. Part three is devoted to the *analysis of knowledge; scientific, moral and religious knowledge; skepticism*; and finally, the *conclusion*.

I was somewhat bothered by the author's tacit assumption that beliefs are some sort of 'objects' which might be part of the furniture of our minds. While this metaphor is colorful and no doubt explains some of our usage, it should receive more rigorous examination. Sentences like "A thing cannot be stored in memory unless it has entered that storehouse," are worrisome. Anyone who has spent an hour looking for her glasses will no doubt realize that the fact that things are "stored" is no guarantee that they are accessible. There is also an algorithmic element of looking for them and finding them, and as we know from our understanding of computers, there is no clear separation between algorithm and store. That indeed was Turing's brilliant insight. The two, data and algorithm, together produce the process of remembering which is the fundamental activity here. Thinking of beliefs as things is a useful, but also dangerous metaphor.

It seems to be taken for granted that transitivity of tallness (among trees) is analytic, but I wonder if this is really so. Let me illustrate by an example. Suppose there are three chess players A, B, C so that A consistently defeats B, B consistently defeats C and C consistently defeats A. If we defined "better than" as "consistently defeats," then the relation is clearly not transitive. That tallness among trees is transitive

(which I do not dispute) may be a matter of experience rather than be analytic. It could very well be that three trees form a triangle, and someone standing in the center of the triangle, seeing two trees at one time would always see the left tree as taller than the right. While this is not of course our experience, one does need experience to know that this never happens.

While the book is fairly comprehensive, I found important gaps. David Lewis' book *Convention* which treats common knowledge is not mentioned. While *common knowledge* might be considered outside the scope of the book, it is surely relevant to *social knowledge* which IS discussed on pages 265-67. More glaring is the omission of Lewis' paper on elusive knowledge which is surely relevant to a discussion of *skepticism*. Again, while there is a discussion of synthetic and a priori propositions, Kripke's examples of propositions which are *necessary* but not *a priori* is not mentioned, nor is there mention of Putnam's *natural kinds* which are germane to some of the issues discussed, like whether gold is necessarily malleable.

The Gettier problem is discussed, but without resorting to Gettier's own examples or to subsequent literature. The author supplies examples of his own, making much use of his own backyard, and of his friend Jane.

I was pleased by the author's acknowledgement that religious knowledge may well be possible, at least for some. This is not to say that it exists, but only that it should not be dismissed out of court. It could well be that religious experience is rather like perception, and the author sees no clear reason why an experience of God is less valid than ordinary perception. It would seem that one difference is that experiences of God (or other spiritual reality) are not as widely shared as experiences of maple trees. But that may not be a fundamental *philosophical* difference.

All in all, this is a useful book, but perhaps more suitable to people who are not in a hurry, and should surely be supplemented by a good anthology of very recent papers.

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