

SOME RECENT WORK IN EPISTEMOLOGY

BY DUNCAN PRITCHARD

- A Priori Justification*. BY ALBERT CASULLO. (Oxford UP, 2003. Pp. xiii + 249. Price £35.00.)
- Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs Externalism, Foundations vs Virtues*. BY LAURENCE BONJOUR AND ERNEST SOSA. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. Pp. xii + 240. Price £50.00 h/b, £16.99 p/b.)
- New Essays on Semantic Externalism and Self-Knowledge*. EDITED BY SUSANA NUCGETELLI. (MIT Press, 2003. Pp. vii + 317. Price £23.50.)
- Pathways to Knowledge: Private and Public*. BY ALVIN I. GOLDMAN. (Oxford UP, 2002. Pp. xiv + 224. Price £25.00.)
- The Sceptics: Contemporary Essays*. EDITED BY STEVEN LUPER. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003. Pp. xxiii + 293. Price £50.00.)
- Thinking about Knowing*. BY JAY F. ROSENBERG. (Oxford UP, 2002. Pp. viii + 257. Price £30.00.)

Epistemology is currently enjoying a renaissance. To a large extent, this has been sparked by some exciting new proposals, such as the contextualist theories advanced by Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose, David Lewis and Michael Williams, the modal conceptions of knowledge offered by Fred Dretske and Robert Nozick, and the virtue epistemologies put forward by John Greco, Ernest Sosa and Linda Zagzebski, to name but three currently popular views. Increasingly, however, this rebirth in epistemological theorizing has been driven less by the production of new theories and more by the application of the latest batch of novel proposals to other areas of philosophy.

A good illustration of this from the selection of books under review here is the contemporary debate regarding the vexed relationship between content externalism and self-knowledge, which is the focus of the volume of essays edited by Susana Nuccetelli. Here we have a controversy that has blended some of the most innovative aspects of recent epistemological theorizing with issues in the philosophy of mind and language, with the emphasis being on the so-called 'McKinsey paradox' concerning the putative incompatibility of content externalism and privileged self-knowledge. Whilst early responses to this supposed paradox concentrated on the

formulation of the content externalist thesis, whilst treating the epistemic concepts at issue as, essentially, primitives, more recent work in this area has drawn out some of the epistemological implications of this debate, and looked at how these implications fit in with recent movements in epistemology. Many of the articles collected in this volume are instances of this 'second phase' of the debate.

In particular, it is tremendously useful to have the new articles by Martin Davies and Crispin Wright, which revisit a previous exchange between the pair where some of the epistemological morals of the McKinsey debate were first extracted. The focus for Davies and Wright is the puzzle's employment of a closure-type epistemic principle which they call 'transmission'. Simplifying somewhat, the possibility which Davies and Wright explore is that whilst the closure principle for warrant utilized by this puzzle is sound – if *A* is warranted in believing a proposition, and knows that it entails a second proposition, then *A* is also warranted in believing this second proposition – its use of the stronger transmission principle is not. In essence, the latter principle demands not only that warrant transfers across known entailments, but also that *A*'s warrant for the antecedent proposition enjoys an epistemic priority relative to the warrant *A* has for the consequent proposition.

Question-begging (valid) arguments are good illustrations of the need for this distinction, in that anyone who has a warrant for the premises of such an argument will also by default have a warrant for the conclusion. Closure is thus not (at least not obviously) in question in such arguments. Crucially, however, question-begging arguments cannot be used to convince someone of the conclusion of the argument, since the agent's warrant for the relevant antecedent proposition already *presupposes* (in a sense that needs to be more fully explained) having warrant for the consequent proposition. Accordingly, one does not *thereby* gain a warrant for the consequent proposition from accepting the warrant that the agent has for the antecedent proposition (coupled with knowledge of the entailment). Thus, although there is clearly *something* wrong with question-begging arguments, the fault cannot be laid at the door of closure, but instead seems to lie in how these arguments offend against the more demanding transmission principle. Given the *prima facie* plausibility of closure, this is all to the good.

If such a distinction could be made clear, and could be shown to be applicable to the McKinsey debate, then it would have the potential to show that there is something amiss with the reasoning employed in this puzzle, without the faulty part here being the independently plausible closure principle for warrant. The importance of this discussion does not simply lie in its potential application to the McKinsey debate, however, since this diagnosis of the McKinsey paradox also holds out the promise of explaining why the closure principle can seem so problematic when used in certain ways that are independent of this debate. For example, it has long been noted that with closure in play one can defend a compelling radical sceptical argument, and this has prompted some epistemologists, most notably Dretske and Nozick, to deny the principle. Indeed, it was the purely epistemological debate regarding closure that, arguably, was the original stimulus for the line of questioning regarding the transmission principle which Davies and Wright have explored. Perhaps, however, the flaw in the sceptical case, as in the case of the McKinsey puzzle,

is not closure at all, but rather the related transmission principle? This could thus be an instance in which a new proposal in epistemology, in this case regarding closure, provokes an intriguing line of discussion in another area of philosophy, in this case regarding the McKinsey debate – only for that idea, in the process, to transform itself into a novel epistemological thesis in its own right, one which has ramifications for epistemology in general (indeed, one which undermines the argument for the original proposal).

In this new exchange we see Wright and Davies developing their positions on this issue in interesting, and increasingly disparate, ways. The dialogue between Wright and Davies is also usefully supplemented with papers by Brian McLaughlin, Michael McKinsey and Jessica Brown, which further explore the themes raised by this exchange. Collectively, the papers contained in this section of the volume make an enlightening addition to the literature, and will set the standard for future discussions of this largely epistemological diagnosis of the McKinsey puzzle.

The rest of the volume moves away from this specific issue about the status of the transmission principle to look at various other features of the McKinsey paradox. For example, Joseph Owens examines the paradox's reliance on a questionable notion of self-knowledge, whilst Matthias Steup and Kevin Falvey consider the relationship between this puzzle and sceptical arguments, both in the radical case of external world scepticism (Steup) and in the more restricted case of scepticism about self-knowledge (Falvey). In general, the volume reads like a *Who's Who* of the main participants in this debate, including contributions from Dretske, Anthony Brueckner, Sanford Goldberg and Richard Fumerton. There is also a neat and readable introduction by the editor herself. All in all, this is a valuable addition to the debate on the relationship between content externalism and self-knowledge, and will be of interest not only to those working in this area but also to anyone who wishes to get a snapshot of the current state of play in this regard.

On the face of it, the general contribution of Steven Luper's edited collection of papers on scepticism is not quite so clear. Many who follow the epistemological literature will be familiar with Luper because of the excellent volume of papers that he edited in the late 1980s on Nozick's 'tracking' account of knowledge. Like his previous volume on Nozick's epistemology, this volume on scepticism will be of great interest to those working in the relevant area, but of limited interest, I fear, to those outside it. Indeed, it is hard to see how Luper's volume could have avoided this fate, given that it appears so soon after the 2000 volume on this subject edited by DeRose and Fritz Warfield (*Skepticism*, Oxford UP). That collection of papers brought together all the main recent articles in this area, along with a readable introduction that surveyed the literature, and it is little surprise that it turned out to be a relative best-seller in philosophical terms, given that it was able to appeal both to the specialist in epistemology who wanted all the latest papers to hand and to interested academics and advanced students who were not necessarily working in this area of epistemology. Short of merely reproducing large sections of the DeRose and Warfield volume, Luper was faced with little choice but to go up-market and produce something of interest more to the specialist than to the general philosophy academic (much less to the philosophy student).

Still, this is an excellent collection of papers, and Luper has managed to bring together all the usual suspects in this regard, including Brueckner, Dretske, Robert Fogelin, Richard Foley, Peter Klein, James Van Cleve and Sosa. Usefully, he also reprints Lewis' famous 1996 paper on contextualism, entitled 'Elusive Knowledge', as well as Hilary Putnam's now legendary discussion of brains in vats which appeared as ch. 1 of his 1981 book *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge UP). Luper should also be applauded for eliciting contributions from philosophers you would not usually see in a volume of this sort, even though as their contributions indicate, they have a lot of interest to say. Gilbert Harman, Keith Lehrer and Marie McGinn each provide a perceptive commentary on scepticism that takes a route not currently being adequately explored, whilst the inclusion of an article on scepticism and social constructivism by David Bloor is inventive and makes the volume all the more distinctive. As one would expect, Luper also does a very effective job in the introduction, where he offers a neat taxonomy of the different types of sceptical (and thus anti-sceptical) theories that are available, and, along the way, identifies where the contributors to this volume stand in this regard.

In general, the volume is at its strongest where it has taken the opportunity to get leading figures in the literature to offer synopses of their views regarding scepticism. Of particular note in this respect is Klein's chapter, in which he sets out his distinctive infinitist proposal allowing infinite chains of supporting reasons (surely one of the most intriguing epistemological theses of recent years); and Sosa's chapter, in which he describes his neo-Moorean response to the sceptic, based on the modal epistemic 'safety' principle, and contrasts this proposal with contextualist and sensitivity-based competitor theories. McGinn's contribution, in which she outlines her broadly Wittgensteinian response to the sceptical problem (namely, that neither sceptical nor anti-sceptical assertions have a truth-value), also falls into this category of being a useful précis of an important view. The McGinn article is particularly helpful, however, given that, as noted above, this specific response to the sceptical problem has not received the discussion it deserves in the contemporary literature. For the most part this neglect reflects the fact that it is typically just taken as given that we understand what the sceptic, and thus the anti-sceptic, is trying to say; but as McGinn shows, this assumption is far from being obviously true.

Whilst this is not a collection that can compete with the DeRose and Warfield text as regards being the best general volume of papers on this subject-matter – the DeRose and Warfield volume is, for example, far more suitable for teaching purposes – no epistemologist who is serious about the sceptical debate (which, after all, is most of us these days) can afford to miss this book from Luper.

The only other collection of papers in this clutch of books is Alvin Goldman's volume, which brings together some of his recent writing on epistemology. In particular, we have here Goldman's most recent statements on such apparently diverse – although, as he shows, in fact inter-related – topics as the epistemic externalism/internalism dispute, social epistemology, virtue epistemology, naturalized epistemology, and *a priori* justification. Goldman may have been an established figure in epistemology now for nearly forty years, but he shows no sign of letting up.

As the title of the volume suggests, the theme that connects these papers is their discussion of the various ways, or 'pathways', through which one can gain knowledge. The book is organized into three parts. The first part sets the scene for parts II and III by introducing Goldman's latest verdict on three debates that are key to contemporary epistemology: the epistemic externalism/internalism distinction; the nature of *a priori* justification; and the role of the epistemic virtues. With the general contours of his epistemological position established, Goldman moves on to explore both the 'private' (part II) and the 'public' (part III) pathways to knowledge. In the case of the former, Goldman undertakes a detailed exploration of the epistemic status of introspection and intuition. In the case of the latter, the focus is on the kinds of issues that took centre stage in his 1999 book *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford UP), such as the general question of the nature and goals of social epistemology, along with the more specific issues that arise in this regard, such as how one is to assess the testimony of experts.

Throughout the book Goldman's discussions exhibit two inter-related features that have become closely associated with his work. The first is his concern to apply epistemology to concrete questions and thus to avoid treating the discipline as a purely abstract affair. This theme in his work is obviously most explicit in the third part of the book, especially in his discussion of experts. The second feature is acute sensitivity to the relevant empirical data. Given the difficulty of keeping abreast of recent developments in one's own philosophical area these days, it is quite remarkable that Goldman somehow manages to maintain a close eye on the work being conducted in the cognitive sciences as well.

This second theme in Goldman's work is brought out quite neatly in the chapter entitled 'Internalism Exposed', a 1999 paper reprinted from the *Journal of Philosophy*, in which Goldman, the arch-externalist, lays down his latest attack on internalist epistemological theories. His strategy here is to elucidate what he takes to be the most plausible version of epistemic internalism, and then to show that even this rendering of the view faces devastating difficulties. Along the way, the familiar arguments against internalism are rehearsed, although this time with an eye to the contemporary versions of epistemic internalism which have recently been proposed by such figures as Steup and Richard Feldman. In essence, his chief complaint against epistemic internalism in the first part of the paper is that even a weak form of internalism, one which construes the accessibility requirement for internalist justification in such a way that it allows the use of memory, would succumb to the fatal problem of how to deal with what Goldman calls (p. 10) the 'problem of forgotten evidence'. As he points out, many justified beliefs are such that the agent, whilst forming a belief in an appropriate manner, is no longer able to recall the evidence that supports it. The justification remains, argues Goldman, because of the belief's pedigree. Crucially, however, such facts about the belief's pedigree are 'external' in the relevant sense, and so are inconsequential by the lights of epistemic internalism. Even a weak form of internalism will thus directly lead to a wide-ranging scepticism about justified belief.

In the second half of the paper Goldman raises some more novel suggestions regarding what he takes to be the underlying problems with epistemic internalism.

In particular, he points out that internalists typically help themselves to the idea that the knower has the relevant special access not only to, for example, the supporting evidence for the belief in question, but also to the logical and probabilistic relations that obtain between different beliefs and the epistemic principles by the light of which one's beliefs should be epistemically assessed. This is, however, extremely implausible, as Goldman shows. The issue here is not simply that we cannot assume that ordinary believers have the kinds of analytical powers and theoretical epistemological knowledge that (rather presumptively) we might be inclined to ascribe to analytical philosophers, but rather that even such 'idealized' agents would not have the reflective capacities needed to gain a justified belief. Drawing on recent work in the cognitive sciences, Goldman argues that an immediate problem raised by this 'computational' element in epistemic internalism is that no justification could ever, it seems, be immediate, since it would always depend on what he calls a 'doxastic decision interval' (p. 13). Moreover, it is not as if such intervals are likely to be small. Indeed, if anything, they are going to be prohibitively large. As he puts the point (p. 14):

Using the truth-table method to check for the consistency of a belief system with 138 independent atomic propositions, even an ideal computer working at 'top speed' (checking each row of a truth-table in the time it takes a light ray to traverse the diameter of a proton) would take 20 billion years, the estimated time from the 'big-bang' dawn of the universe to the present. Presumably, 20 billion years is not an acceptable doxastic decision interval!

Goldman continues by attacking, again on largely empirical grounds, the 'armchair' methodology employed by epistemic internalists. In particular, he highlights just how implausible it is to suppose that such a methodology could enable us to gain access to the immutable epistemic principles by which we should assess our beliefs, especially given the open-ended nature of philosophical discussion on the content of these principles. Moreover, he cites a number of empirical studies which have clear ramifications for the issue of which epistemic principles we should employ, but which would seem to be irrelevant by the lights of the internalist methodology. As Goldman shows, internalist epistemologists disregard such data at their peril.

This is a devastating and sustained critique of epistemic internalism. Since this view is currently on the rise again after a generation of neglect, this comprehensive and, in places, novel critique of internalism could not have come at a better time.

On the whole, the discussion in this volume is as subtle and sophisticated as you would expect from a philosopher of Goldman's calibre, with nearly *all* of the papers in this volume constituting a definitive contribution to the epistemological debate to which they are directed. Accordingly, since one will almost certainly be reading (and then re-reading) most of these papers in a piecemeal fashion over the next few years anyhow (if one has not read most of them already), there is little point in resisting the urge to have a copy of this book to hand.

Two other distinguished elder statesmen of epistemology, Laurence Bonjour and Ernest Sosa, make an appearance in an excellent book on epistemic justification.

The volume is structured so that BonJour and Sosa survey their own positions in epistemology and then reply to the other's contribution. In the case of BonJour, this means relating the reasons behind his now notorious apostasy from coherentism – until relatively recently he was the view's foremost exponent – and outlining a version of internalist foundationalism. Along the way we are treated to his forceful critique of epistemic externalism, which is one aspect of his view that has stayed constant, and an unusually frank account of the problems facing epistemic foundationalism. Sosa's contribution also ends with a defence of foundationalism, though with Sosa the thesis is resolutely cast along externalist lines and is allied to a virtue-theoretic thesis. We thus have foundationalism being defended in both its classical and contemporary guises.

The chief merit of this volume for researchers in epistemology, however, comes with the commentaries that BonJour and Sosa offer on each other's proposals, which make for fascinating reading. In particular, what these commentaries achieve is to draw out the exact points at which these very different foundationalist views diverge. In doing so, they also indicate how the more 'traditional' epistemological debates regarding epistemic foundations can contribute to contemporary discussions of knowledge and justification which, until relatively recently, hardly engaged with the issue of epistemic foundations at all (this is especially surprising once one remembers that much of contemporary epistemology is concerned with the problem of radical scepticism and, traditionally at least, this problem has pretty much been *defined* as the problem of epistemic foundations). It will not just be specialists who are interested in this volume, however, since the readable style and dialectical structure make it ideal as a set text for an undergraduate (or even, properly supplemented, postgraduate) course in epistemology. This is one text that will have a very long and active shelf-life.

This leaves us with the two monographs contained in this collection of books: Jay Rosenberg's rather idiosyncratic presentation of his particular brand of Peircean epistemology, and Albert Casullo's authoritative treatment of *a priori* justification. On the face of it, Rosenberg's proposal to understand knowledge as adequately justified belief might sound peculiarly old-fashioned, until one notices that the usual demand that the belief must be true is absent from the definition. This is because Rosenberg regards the addition of a truth requirement as 'vacuous and idle' (p. 2) given what is required by his account of justification. The radical nature of the view becomes further apparent once one realizes that his account of justification involves a rather extreme contextualist thesis (he refers to his position as 'perspectivalism'), which regards all attributions of knowledge as being necessarily relative to an epistemic perspective.

Whilst there is a great deal that is of interest in Rosenberg's book, it is ultimately unsatisfying. Throughout the discussions are thorough and scholarly, and there are some real gems to be found here. Unfortunately, however, the book also contains several sections that are over-long. This is particularly so when it comes to some of the exegetical discussions in the book, as when the author engages with such figures as Moore and Descartes. Whilst rigorous attention to detail is obviously admirable, it is out of place in such an ambitious book that aims to canvass support for a novel

claim. (Indeed, the detail is not always even philosophically relevant. Rosenberg has an odd habit of adding references which confirm entirely incidental empirical claims that commentators make. For example, when, on p. 154, he quotes Barry Stroud remarking that what ‘... we aspire to and eventually claim to know is the objective truth or falsity of, for example, “There is a mountain more than five thousand metres high in Africa”’, Rosenberg feels it necessary to add, in a footnote, that there could be either three or four such mountains, depending on how one counts, and proceeds to enumerate the possibilities in these respects. This is detail that we do not need.) The upshot of all this is that in a book nearly 250 pages long the proposal as a whole is still left woefully underdescribed. For example, it is striking in places just how similar some of Rosenberg’s remarks are to the kinds of claims made by Michael Williams in his groundbreaking book *Unnatural Doubts* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Rosenberg acknowledges the similarities, but never pauses to contrast the two views fully. And yet this would have been extremely helpful, since it would have helped to situate his claims within the wider epistemological literature.

In Rosenberg’s defence, however, it should be said that this book is both genuinely interesting and original, and these two traits are, of course, to be praised. He clearly comes to the core questions facing epistemology with a fresh eye uncontaminated by over-exposure to the specifically epistemological contemporary literature. Instead, he brings a breadth of philosophical expertise and experience which ensures that he says things that one does not always expect to hear. This is a very useful contribution for anyone to make to a philosophical debate. A hard core of epistemologists will therefore find in this scholarly and thorough book a tangential approach to the subject which will suitably reward their efforts. It could, however, have so easily been a text with a much wider appeal.

Casullo offers a deep and comprehensive survey of the debate regarding *a priori* justification which would in itself be a valuable contribution to the literature even without the development of his own proposal, which emerges as the book proceeds. He is clear in separating out different issues that can be raised when one talks about the *a priori*, and skilfully illustrates how these very different questions can be illicitly treated as equivalent, thereby infecting the subsequent answers that are offered. In particular, taking his lead from Kant, Casullo usefully structures the book in terms of three questions: first, the question of what *a priori* justification is (as the title of the book suggests, Casullo focuses on the concept of *a priori* justification rather than the concept of *a priori* knowledge); secondly, the question of whether there is any *a priori* justification; thirdly, the question of what the relationship is between, on the one hand, the *a priori* and, on the other, the necessary and the analytic.

Casullo’s own thesis about *a priori* justification boils down to the claim that one should understand the concept of *a priori* justification in a minimal fashion as simply the concept of non-experiential justification. His thesis here is a purely epistemic one, in that it defines *a priori* justification entirely in epistemic terms, in contrast to those views that define this concept, in whole or in part, in terms of such non-epistemic factors as necessity or analyticity. He also argues that the question of whether or not there is any such thing as *a priori* justification is answered by determining whether or not there are non-experiential sources of justification.

Interestingly, however, Casullo treats experience as a natural kind, the underlying nature of which must be uncovered by empirical investigation. Accordingly, he further claims that empirical investigation is required to answer the question of whether or not there is any *a priori* justification. In doing so, he rejects the blanket arguments against the possibility of *a priori* justification offered by radical empiricists and epistemological naturalists.

This book really is a paradigm example of clear analytical philosophy. Page by page one is struck by the precision of the language, the way in which each subtlety or nuance in our rather hazy concepts in this respect is drawn out for further examination and slotted back again into its proper place in the conceptual architecture. If I do have one quibble – and this really is a counsel of perfection – it is that whilst many of the central figures in the recent literature make an appearance here, notably such philosophers as Bonjour and Alvin Plantinga, we get not so much as a footnote about how the stance that Casullo takes on *a priori* justification might bear on one of the key spurs for discussion of *a priori* justification in the contemporary debate, *viz* the issue I began with, the McKinsey puzzle regarding the putative incompatibility of content externalism and privileged self-knowledge. All in all, however, this is an excellent book, one that will, I believe, set the benchmark for treatments of *a priori* justification for years to come.

So what does this raft of recent books in epistemology tell us about the current state of play in this area of philosophy? Rosenberg's book is perhaps too unusual to indicate any general trends (though that is not a criticism), but the other books reviewed here do at least suggest some possible tentative conclusions about the state of contemporary epistemology. The first is that the debate about scepticism, for so long the driving force of much of the epistemological literature, is starting to level out. What we find in the Luper volume, for example, are either developments of previous anti-sceptical theories (including reprints of classic papers which put forward the original view), or papers which reconsider responses to the sceptical problem that predate the current batch of proposals (this category includes papers which offer meta-epistemological reflections on the nature of the sceptical debate). Crucially, however, what we do not find here are new theories of knowledge advanced primarily to deal with the sceptical problem. Similarly, the Bonjour and Sosa volume does not treat the sceptical problem as the central issue in epistemology, but rather as one important consideration among others; and the problem of scepticism hardly makes an appearance at all in Goldman's collection of papers. Even Rosenberg's book, though of ambiguous import in this respect for the reason just given, at least seems to suggest a move away from purely epistemological treatments of scepticism, and towards a style of theorizing about knowledge which reintroduces other areas of philosophy into the heart of this debate (in this case, that means, primarily, the philosophy of truth).

The second tentative, and more positive, conclusion which we can draw about the state of play in the epistemological debate from these new books is that there is clearly a renewal of interest in the *a priori*, both in terms of what one might call

'pure' treatments of this notion, as with Casullo, and in terms of discussions of the relationship between this notion and other issues in epistemology and philosophy more generally, as illustrated by the Nuccetelli volume and certain papers in the Goldman and Luper volumes. It seems, then, that just as one cycle in epistemology is coming to a close, a new one is appearing that has the potential to be just as influential to the next generation of epistemologists (and one hopes just as fruitful as well).

It is not so long ago that figures like Richard Rorty were preaching the death of epistemology. As this collection of recent books in epistemology indicates, however, the pessimism did not last long and is certainly out of place now. Epistemology has seen one of its most productive periods of growth in the last twenty-five years, and the proper prognosis on the evidence of this batch of books is that the dynamic state of contemporary epistemology should ensure its continued health for many generations to come.

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