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About the reviewer

Sergio Cremaschi is Associate Professor of Moral Philosophy at the Amedeo Avogadro University at Vercelli. His publications include the edited books Filosofia analitica e filosofia continentale (1997); Le origini dell’etica occidentale. Da Pitagora a Ockham (2004); L’etica moderna. Da Grozio a Nietsche (2004); L’etica del Novecento. Dopo Nietsche (2004), as well as papers in English on the philosophy of economics, ethics, metaphor, and controversies.


Reviewed by Nikolay Milkov (University of Bielefeld)

The objective of this book is to show that classical philosophical scepticism rests on mistaken premises. To this end it sets out to question many received views as regards the concepts of knowledge, justification and truth. On the positive side, the book advances systematic epistemological arguments. These are developed along some tenets of Peircean pragmatism and claim that attribution of knowledge is always made from some epistemic perspective, with reference to a particular context of enquiry. The corresponding conception of justification holds that a person’s belief is justified only if the concrete, living, context-situated person herself is justified in believing the proposition in question. Knowledge is defined as an adequately justified belief, not as justified true belief: It is the epistemic conduct of persons that is justified or not, and it is precisely this conduct that has to be adequate. This is an internalist (or coherentist) position (as opposed to the externalist, or correspondence one), which applies to both theoretical and intuitive (perceptual) beliefs.

Chapter 1, ‘The Myth of Cartesian Scepticism: Dreaming, Doubts, and Epistemic Closure’, begins with criticism of what the author calls the formalist
paradigm in epistemology, introduced by Descartes. It claims that the collection of propositions that we accept or believe has a hierarchical structure. Some of our opinions are ‘based’ on others; the latter ‘ground’ or ‘support’ the former. The formalist paradigm defines the task of the epistemologist as being to demolish the ‘edifice’ of knowledge in order to reveal its ‘foundations’. Rosenberg’s comment: This position of Descartes’ treats mathematical knowledge as a model for knowledge per se.

The chapter suggests further a new, close reading of some passages of Descartes’ so as to show that his arguments do not support his conclusions. First of all, Descartes’ main claim in his Meditations on First Philosophy is that a proposition will be certain and indubitable only when no ‘reason for doubt’ can be found in it. In this way he rejects all doubtful propositions. At the same time, he declares doubtful all epistemically problematic propositions. In fact, however, this position is not a case of suspension of doubtful beliefs (ataraxia) but rather an active disbelief. It is an epistemic pretence that shows Descartes’ method of doubt to be exaggerated and hyperbolic (p. 14). Second, Descartes accepts as real only aspects of corporeal nature that can be addressed by mathematics, such as shape, size, number, place, and time. Rosenberg’s comment is that in accordance with his own methodological precepts, the doubtfulness of Descartes’ belief in the existence of ‘corporeal nature in general’ depends on the possibility of his mistakenly believing that there are bodies, and that this will in fact be possible only if the existence of bodies is not in fact a necessary condition of the existence of believers (p. 40). This is depicted as a paradox of Cartesian hyperbolic criticism.

In Chapter 2, ‘The Myth of Cartesian Certainty: Epoché and Inner Sense’, Rosenberg opposes Descartes’ notion of certainty according to which “there is a class of ‘incorrigible’ true propositions somehow insulated against the possibility of error or false belief” (p.60). Instead, he accepts a form of global fallibilism with respect to matter-of-fact convictions. According to it, there is no epistemologically infallible mental operation — what is usually supposed to be the cogito — and so, there is no essential connection between incorrigible certainty and subjectivity. The illusion of subjective certainty results from confusing the trivial and vacuous infallibility of the pure epoché with subjective reports of perceptual appearance in verbs such as ‘looks’ and ‘sounds’.

The impossibility of absolutely certain propositions, Cartesian style, is clearly seen in the fact that when we express thoughts or beliefs, we always take a stand on the matter: we support or defend their contents. We thus make epistemic commitments to propositions that are on different levels, ranging
between doubt and certitude. The task of the *epoché*, in contrast, is “the complete suspension of epistemic commitment and ‘retreat’ from any objective truth-claim” (p. 81).

The theme of Chapter 3, ‘Immediate Knowledge: The New Dialectic of Givenness’, is epistemic justification. Rosenberg understands this as a practice of justification reasoning, in this way revising the old conception of knowledge as justified true belief that can be traced back to Plato. According to the master of the justification reasoning argument, Wilfred Sellars (1963: 168), “[to] be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only have authority, this authority must in some sense be recognized by the person whose report it is”. This is Sellars’ *strong epistemic internalism*. Rosenberg elaborates this strong internalism as *proceduralism*, putting the stress on the fact that the activity of justification is prior in the order of understanding to the state of being justified (or warranted):

The fundamental proceduralist conviction is that what in the first instance are justified or unjustified are the *conducts of persons*. Believing a proposition is, broadly speaking, something a person does, an epistemic conduct (p. 113).

The epistemic justification requires in particular a capacity on the part of the subject to produce adequate arguments for supposing that it is reasonable to believe that the proposition is justifiable.

Proceduralism is contrasted with *reliabilism*, which is basically concerned with the genesis of beliefs; it is state-centred and backward looking. The Sellars–Rosenberg conception, in contrast, is forward-looking and activity-centred. The two philosophers “are fundamentally concerned with what a believer can do to justify her beliefs, however formed, if and when they are appropriately challenged” (p. 117). In its full-fledged form, this conception appears as a *strong proceduralism*. It contends that “[a] person whose belief is not only true but also a product of a reliable belief-forming process is in a better objective epistemic position than one whose belief is merely true” (p. 124).

In Chapter 4, ‘Everyday Knowledge: When does S know that *p*?’, the author claims that the problem with the conventional understanding of knowledge as justified true belief is that our actual evidence, e.g., the view of this house from the car window, does not suffice to yield knowledge about it. In truth, knowledge attributions are context-dependent, the context itself being set out by the complexity of the situation, the supposed risk of error, the importance of getting things right, etc. For example, sometimes the epistemic investigation can be a part of a scientific enquiry; another time it can be pedagogical, etc.
In other words, justifications are different in kind. In the context of this claim we can imagine that two individuals, say, Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous characters, Watson and Holmes, know the same fact, but in two different ways. This means that Watson and Holmes are in two different ‘informational states’. Only Holmes, but not Watson, believes, on the basis of the evidence, that the coachman is the murderer — indeed, only Holmes had made the connection between the evidence at hand and the facts. Apparently, Holmes had introduced another level of enquiry and thereby occasioned a higher level of scrutiny. The conclusion is, first, that human beings can be objectively situated in many epistemic positions; and, second, that epistemic perspectivalism is much more sophisticated than widespread contextualist views.

Further, we can say that S has justifiably come to believe \( p \) when S has done everything that he ought to have done in his epistemic context in order to be entitled to be fully confident in his opinion. This is a matter of epistemic ethics (Rosenberg also speaks of ‘deontological considerations,’ ‘deontological assessment from different epistemic perspectives,’ etc.), i.e., evaluating epistemic performance. S must satisfy the standards for performance-adequacy appropriate to his epistemic circumstances.

In Chapter 5, ‘Certitude Sustained: Portrait of G. E. Moore as a Perspectivalist’, Rosenberg finds congenial convictions in the epistemology of G. E. Moore. The author is cautious enough to specify that the views expounded in the chapter are not those of the authentic Moore, but rather Moorean in spirit.

According to Rosenberg’s interpretation, the main point of Moore’s essay “Proof of an External World” is that “when it comes to the existence of external things we do not begin in ignorance” (p. 180). We already know of their existence, as well as many other things about them. Rosenberg interprets this position of Moore’s as challenging a tacit presupposition of the Cartesians, namely, that rigorous proof must proceed from premises that are not only true, but are also the most epistemically secure.

Furthermore, Moore is claimed to embrace a conception of epistemic possibility according to which “[w]hat a person does not know on one occasion she may come to know on another, and various people’s knowledge can differ dramatically in a single setting” (p. 186). Watson and Holmes, for example, “initially agree on the truth or falsehood of a vast number of propositions which collectively constitute the informational setting within which their enquiries begin” (p. 188). Their epistemic community also shares a family of relevant and acceptable procedures of enquiry, which Rosenberg calls epistemics.
In contrast to this ‘epistemological liberalism’, the sceptic typically hangs on to possibilities, e.g., dream-possibilities, which are ruled out of the realm of true knowledge.

Rosenberg concludes his interpretation of Moore by arguing that, according to this author,

all genuine [epistemic] enquiry is ‘practical’, both in the sense of being situated, i.e., occurring in a determinate epistemic setting, and in the sense of being teleological, i.e., informed by the conception of a realized end. It aims at setting belief, closing an open question, for a purpose (p. 197).

This means, first, that “[k]nowledge-ascriptions are not epistemic state-attri-
tubutions but perspectival transactional appraisals”; and, second, that the justifications are inferential, perspectival, and intersubjective (ibid.).

In Chapter 6, ‘Peircean Enquiry: Knowledge without Truth’, Rosenberg criticises the claim rather popular among philosophers that belief is not executable conduct — one simply finds oneself believing or disbelieving this or that. To this position Rosenberg opposes Sellars’ concern with what a believer can do to justify her beliefs. Justification is in the first instance a cognitive-epistemic activity: of giving reasons, citing evidence, enumerating grounds, etc. The goal of our epistemic activity is not objective truth. It cannot be truth since nothing could count as a reason to conclude that we had finally arrived at such a truth. That goal can only be determined by our epistemic practices. Rosenberg’s conclusion is that, instead of searching for truth, we would do better to identify the goal of the epistemic activities as justified — or fixed — belief.

What, however, is a justified belief? Rosenberg answers this question by citing Peirce. First of all, Peirce claims that “all our concepts — epistemological, semantic, and ontological alike — should be understood in terms of our [epis-
temic] practices and their effects on us” (p. 220). We should not understand our epistemological concepts (e.g., knowledge) in semantic terms (e.g., truth) and the semantic concepts in ontological terms (correspondence with the facts).

Secondly, Peirce is, like Rosenberg, a fallibilist. That is, he claims that people cannot attain absolute certainty when it comes to questions of fact. Our empirical knowledge is a self-correcting enterprise that can put any claim in jeopardy, although not all at once. We consciously submit our provisionally fixed beliefs to the test of experience.

Thirdly, according to Peirce a belief is fixed (or firm) when it is freed from ‘irritating’ doubt. The vanquishing of doubt is, in fact, the immediate aim of the enquiry. “[The] enquiry is successful whenever it eventuates in the extinction of doubt and the onset of a firm conviction” (p. 232). Fixed beliefs are something
like momentary photographic images of the living world, and what fixes beliefs is the justification. In proceduralist terms, a fixed belief is a justified belief.

Finally, two critical remarks. In the lines above I formulated the main arguments of Jay Rosenberg’s new book as an ordered whole. Unfortunately, this whole is not that easy to discern and follow in the book itself. The problem lies in the peculiar style: Rosenberg typically begins his chapters polemizing against an alternative view. His solution usually develops in the second part of the chapter, reaching its final formulation towards its end. This stylistic choice makes the prose baroque, even tortuous, and the book difficult to read.

This flaw notwithstanding, I want to stress — and we have already seen this in the lines above — that the author develops a powerful thesis which, I am sure, will find enthusiastic support. Whatever its merits, however, I personally have considerable reservations about the Sellars–Rosenberg’s project to reform analytic epistemology by way of making it closer to our ‘real knowing’ of the world. In this connection I must note that the tenor of Rosenberg’s book is strongly iconoclastic; the author takes the position of a warrior battling against a series of misunderstandings and prejudices that started with Descartes’ epistemological revolution and were further held by Russell, Carnap and their friends.

My grounds for being sceptical in this respect are that, from its very beginning, and in its best examples — Russell’s Our Knowledge and Carnap’s Aufbau —, analytic epistemology’s priority was to advance models, the task of which is only to show how knowledge functions. Further, these models were connected into logically flawless wholes. The reason for accepting this policy was the awareness that, at least at this stage, we cannot provide a logically strict analysis of how we know the world (see Milkov 2003: 20); and logical strictness is what matters most — not the ‘closeness to reality’ striven for; this is usually a concern of continental philosophers. In this sense I cannot help but see the project of Sellars–Rosenberg as an attempt to change a style of philosophizing — authentic analytic philosophy — into something else, rather than in an effort to revise it with the aim of improving.

In the end, by way of compensating for these critical remarks, I want to mention a strength of the book that will, perhaps, go unnoticed by other reviewers. These days, it is regarded as entirely normal that the analytic philosopher shows little interest in following and discussing the theoretical results of fellow analysts from other geographic, or language, communities. The current practice is to gravitate toward those who are today considered the cleverest people in the branch, usually taken to be certain American philosophers such

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Issues of responsibility and accountability are at the heart of Olson’s arguments in this book. As such, he chimes with much contemporary political rhetoric. Both the school as institution and the individual learner are endowed with