Introduction

THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF KEITH LEHRER

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Fido sees that there is a bone on the plate, but does Fido know that there is a bone on the plate? David, a two-year-old, sees that the door to the refrigerator is open, but does he know that it is open? Examples such as these prompt very different reactions from philosophers. Some think it is obvious that Fido and David know, and that they know in the same sense as adult humans do. Others respond, equally emphatically, that they do not know, at least not in the same way as adult humans. Philosophers of the latter inclination may grant that someone who believes that Fido knows is allowed to use the term 'know' in any way he or she wishes and, further, that there might be some point in defining a concept of knowledge applicable also to Fido; but, they will urge, that concept will not be of great interest if what we really care about is human knowledge in its characteristic form.

Keith Lehrer belongs to the second category of epistemologists for whom the mere possession of correct information is insufficient for human knowledge, however reliable the source delivering the information may have been. In order to know one must, in addition, recognize that the information one possesses is correct. This additional demand for reasons internal to the subject —characteristic of the position known as internalism—excludes poor old Fido, and probably also David, neither of whom can plausibly be credited with the conceptual resources required for such recognition, for "[t]hey lack any conception of the distinction between veracity and correct information, on the one hand, and deception and misinformation, on the other" (Lehrer, 2000, p. 11).

Why is it so important to recognize that one's sources are reliable? Why does it not suffice that they actually are reliable, that the belief was caused in a reliable way? Lehrer's answer, if I understand him correctly, is that the role of

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knowledge in human reasoning is essential to its nature (ibid., p. 6), and one role of knowledge concerns its employment in reasoning, e.g., in confirming some hypotheses and refuting others. It is essential to knowledge that it enables us to "reason about what is true or false, what is real and unreal" and to justify our knowledge claims "in critical discussion and rational confrontation" (ibid., p. 11). Thus, knowledge, as Lehrer conceives it, is, in its essence, "inextricably woven into reasoning, justification, confirmation, and refutation" (ibid., p. 6).

An externalist will certainly agree that knowledge plays an important role in reasoning, but he or she will typically resist the conclusion that this role is essential to its nature. He or she will concede that it is a good thing to have reasons for one's beliefs—for instance, in convincing others that we know—while insisting that having such reasons is not an ingredient in the very concept of knowledge (see for instance Dretske, 1991). An externalist might even grant that having reasons is part of the pre-systematic concept of knowledge, and yet argue that there are good grounds, in this case, to depart from it in favor of an allegedly more fruitful externalist conception. Several of the papers in this volume address, directly or indirectly, the internalism/externalism issue, e.g., the articles by Ernest Sosa, John Greco, and Volker Halbach. Lehrer's view on justification and causation is discussed in the papers by Jonathan L. Kvanvig and Todd Stewart. Highly relevant in this connection is also the article by James Van Cleve.

The main purpose of this introduction is to survey the main ideas in Lehrer's epistemology, so as to provide the necessary background against which the other papers in this volume can be more readily appreciated. Another aim is to point out what might be some difficulties in Lehrer's view. A majority of these issues are explored in greater detail in the other contributions to this book, and I have added references to guide the reader to the corresponding places. This introduction, then, is also intended to serve as a conceptual and argumentative map of the present book. Unless otherwise indicated, references to Lehrer are to the 2000 edition of his *Theory of Knowledge* (abbreviated *TK*). *Theory of Knowledge*, an extended and thoroughly revised version of Lehrer's early book *Knowledge*, was published for the first time in 1990. Between the two editions there are some interesting differences that will play a role later in this introduction.

1.   COHERENCE AND PERSONAL JUSTIFICATION

Lehrer subscribes to a traditional post-Gettier analysis of knowledge, according to which a subject S knows that p if and only if (i) p is true, (ii) S accepts that p, (iii) S is (personally or subjectively) justified in accepting that p, and (iv) S is justified in accepting that p in some way that does not depend on

a false statement. The last clause is intended to take care of troublesome Gettier examples, a topic I will return to later.

The particular interest of Lehrer's theory lies of course in its details. Taking truth for granted, let us focus first on the condition of acceptance: for S to know that p, S must accept that p. Why "acceptance" and not "belief", and what might be the difference between the two? Acceptance, Lehrer writes, is an attitude defined in terms of some purpose and involves an evaluation of whether the attitude fulfills the purpose. Moreover the special kind of acceptance relevant to knowledge is acceptance for the purpose of "attaining truth and avoiding error with respect to the very thing one accepts" (p. 13): to accept that p if and only if p. Belief, on the other hand, is not defined in terms of a purpose. Belief may happen to serve the purpose of attaining truth and avoiding error but it is not defined in terms of that, or any other, purpose. We may, to take Lehrer's example, believe that a loved one is safe because of the comfort of believing this, and not because of an intrinsic interest in the truth of the matter. Belief, Lehrer argues, is not the attitude characteristic of genuine knowledge; acceptance is. Another feature of acceptance that will play a role later is that it is a functional state, being characterized by the role it plays in thought, inference and action.

Obviously much hinges on the third condition of personal justification. In Lehrer's view, such justification amounts to coherence with a background system. The relevant background system—called the *evaluation system* —consists of three parts: the *acceptance system*, the *preference system* and the *reasoning system*. The acceptance system is the core of the evaluation system and is defined as the set of states of acceptance of S described by statements of the form "S accepts that p" attributing to S just those things S accepts at t with the objective of obtaining truth and avoiding error with respect to the content accepted, that is, with respect to the content that p (p. 130). In the 1990's edition of *TK*, the background system was equated with the acceptance system.

Suppose, to take an example, that S accepts that Paris is the capital of France. That might lead one to expect that the statement "Paris is the capital of France" should be an element of S's acceptance system. But this, as we just saw, is not how Lehrer defines the notion. Rather, the acceptance system contains the statement "S accepts that Paris is the capital of France". So, when Lehrer writes that in personal justification we must start with what we accept (p. 123), this does not mean that we are allowed to take the truth of "Paris is the capital of France" and other propositions we accept for granted. It means only that we may take for granted that we accept those things, i.e., that we take a certain attitude, that of acceptance, towards those propositions. Lehrer sometimes calls the set of all propositions p such that "S accepts that p" is in the acceptance system the *content* of that system, a practice I will follow here.

The preference system of S at t over acceptances is defined as the set of states of preference described by statements of the form "S prefers accepting that p to accepting that q" attributing to S just those preferences S has at t with the objective of obtaining truth and avoiding error with respect to the contents of the acceptances. Finally, the reasoning system of S at t is the set of states of reasoning described by statements of the form "S reasons from acceptance of the premises p_1, p_2, and forth to p_j to acceptance of the conclusion c" with the objective of obtaining truth and avoiding error with respect to the content of the acceptances.

What is Lehrer's motivation for introducing the preference and reasoning systems as part of the evaluation system? As for preferences, he writes the following in his book *Self-Trust* (pp. 27-28): "I have said before that a person is personally justified in accepting something if and only if acceptance of it coheres with the acceptance system of the person. I now think that will not suffice, because preferences are also essential to the kind of coherence that yields justified acceptance." It is also of interest to note that, in Lehrer's view, the justification of preferences parallels the justification of acceptances: "Thus, personally justified acceptance, acceptance justified for me, is acceptance that coheres with an evaluation system including preferences, just as personally justified preference, preference justified for me, is preference that coheres with an evaluation system that includes acceptances" (ibid., p. 28). I will return to the reasoning system in connection with the Gettier problem.

So much for the evaluation system. Justification, we are told, is coherence with that system. How, then, should we understand coherence? The intuitive idea is that we can think of all sorts of objections an imaginative critic may raise to what a person accepts. These objection might be directly incompatible with what the person accepts or they might, while being compatible with the thing accepted, threaten to undermine my reliability in making assessments of the kind in question. For instance, a critic might object to my claim that I see a tree by suggesting that I am merely hallucinating. That would be an example of the first sort of objection. As an example of the second sort, we might take a case in which the critic replies that I cannot tell whether I am hallucinating or not (Lehrer, 1989, p. 253). Coherence, and personal justification, results when all objections have been met.

Thus, the process of justifying a claim has the character of a game with the objections and answers being the different moves the players can make. Lehrer, fittingly, calls it the *justification game*. If all the objections raised by the critic can be met, then the claimant wins the game. If she wins the game, her original claim coheres with the evaluation system and she is personally or subjectively justified in accepting her original claim; if not, she is not justified in her acceptance (*TK*, 1990b, p. 119). Lehrer is careful to point out that the justification game is only a "heuristic device for understanding the

considerations that make a person justified in accepting something rather than a psychological model of mental processes" (ibid.).

Leaving heuristic considerations aside, Lehrer's semi-formal definition of justification runs as follows: *S* is *personally justified* in accepting *p* at *t* if only if *p* coheres with *S*'s evaluation system at *t*. Further, *p coheres with S*'s evaluation system at *t* if and only if all objection to *p* are answered or neutralized relative to *S*'s evaluation system at *t*. This raises the question of how the notion of an objection should be understood, and what it might mean that an objection is answered or neutralized relative to an evaluation system. Lehrer defines the notion of an objection as follows: *o* is an *objection* to *p* if and only if it is more reasonable to accept that *p* on the assumption that *o* is false than on the assumption that *o* is true (relative to *S*'s evaluation system and *t*). An objection *o* to *p* is *answered*, moreover, if and only if *o* is an objection to *p*, but it is more reasonable for *S* to accept *p* than to accept *o* (with the appropriate relativizations). In the 1990 edition of *TK*, objections were called "competitors" and answered objection were said to be "beaten".

Before citing Lehrer's definition of neutralization, it might be helpful to consider an example. Suppose I claim to be seeing a zebra and I am faced with the objection that I am sleeping and dreaming that I see a zebra. Then I might be in a position to answer this objection by showing how it follows from my evaluation system that it is more reasonable that I am actually seeing a zebra than that I am merely dreaming that I see one. But suppose the critic instead were to object merely that people sometimes dream that they see zebras. This is an objection, in Lehrer's technical sense, to my claim that I see a zebra; for it is less reasonable to accept that I actually see a zebra if people sometimes dream that they see zebras than if people never dream that they see zebras. And yet it may be very difficult to answer this objection by showing that it is less reasonable to accept than my claim that I see a zebra for the simple reason that it is very reasonable to accept that people sometimes dream they see zebras. In order to allow the claimant to counter objections of this sort, Lehrer introduces the notion of neutralization. The idea is that I should be allowed to counter an objection by pointing out its irrelevance to the issue. In this case, I would be allowed to reply that the objection that people sometimes dream that they see zebras is irrelevant because I am not dreaming. Lehrer defines neturalization as follows: *n neutralizes o* as an objection to *p* if and only if *o* is an objection to *p*, the conjunction of *o* and *n* is not an objection to *p*, and it is as reasonable for *S* to accept the conjunction of *o* and *n* as to accept *o* alone (with the appropriate relativizations). In the example the conjunction that people sometimes dream they see zebras *and* that I am not dreaming is not an objection to my seeing a zebra. Moreover, it is, we grant, as reasonable for me to accept this conjunction as it is to accept that people sometimes dream they see zebras alone.