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Reviewed by Matthew Carlson

Review: *Righting Epistemology: Hume's Revolution*, by Bredo Johnsen

Matthew Carlson

Righting Epistemology is a bold and eclectic book in which Bredo Johnsen draws together some of the central themes and arguments of his decades-long career in epistemology. The central thread of the book is the story of the epistemological contributions of David Hume and W. V. Quine. On Johnsen's telling, Hume initiated a revolution in epistemology of which Quine's work was the "culmination". Hume's revolution, according to Johnsen, consisted of two discoveries. First, Hume discovered what Johnsen calls "*the argument for radical skepticism concerning the external world*" (57), and thereby showed that "no theory about the nature of the physical world has any probability relative to our observational and memorial knowledge of bits of it" (ix). Second, Hume did not embrace skepticism on the basis of this discovery, but rather, conceived of a new way to think about epistemic justification, namely, reflective equilibrium theory. Both of these discoveries, Johnsen argues, are further developed in the epistemological work of Karl Popper, Nelson Goodman, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, but receive their fullest articulation in the work of W. V. Quine.

The book begins with chapters on Sextus Empiricus and René Descartes (chaps. 1–3). The function of these chapters in the book is primarily to display what Johnsen takes to be ultimately ineffective arguments for external world skepticism. Chapter 1 merits special attention here, since it contains interesting (albeit brief) arguments for the conclusion that Sextus Empiricus is really a radical fallibilist, and not a radical skeptic. This has the effect of bringing Sextus Empiricus closer to Quine than one might have originally suspected. With the ground-clearing of

chapters 1–3 in place, Johnsen brings us to discussion of Hume; in particular, Hume's above-mentioned discoveries of *the argument for radical skepticism concerning the external world* (chap. 4) and an early version of the reflective equilibrium theory of epistemic justification (chap. 5). I'll have more to say about both of these below.

In chapter 6, Johnsen claims that mainstream epistemologists since Hume missed the import of Hume's discoveries. According to Johnsen, "Hume inverted the classical conception of epistemic justification, and thereby righted epistemology: theories are justified to the extent that they instantiate the theoretical virtues, not the extent to which they are 'supported' by inert bodies of data" (79). But because mainstream epistemologists missed this point—and continued to think of the epistemic justification of a belief in terms of the (probabilistic) extent to which it was supported by observational data—they incorrectly thought of Hume as a skeptic. But, Johnsen argues, Hume was not a skeptic. Rather, he developed a new theory of epistemic justification according to which beliefs are justified to the extent that they instantiate certain theoretical virtues. But, because it is possible for a body of beliefs to instantiate these theoretical virtues without being true, this means that it is possible to have a highly justified body of beliefs without having any knowledge. Johnsen takes this to show that "[n]o conception of knowledge . . . is of the slightest epistemological interest" (90).

The heart of the book concerns epistemologists decidedly outside the mainstream of epistemology—Popper, Goodman, and Quine—who declined to theorize about knowledge and instead developed Hume's insights concerning epistemic justification (chaps. 7–10). In particular, Quine developed the most sophisticated refinement of Hume's ideas (chaps. 10–11), about which I will have more to say later. The book ends with further applications of Johnsen's central claims in discussions of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* (chap. 12) and appendices concerning the attempts of Dretske and Putnam to address external world skepticism.

As the above summary should make clear, this book is ambitious and wide-ranging. Moreover, the individual chapters of this book typically contain careful, no-nonsense readings of the texts they concern. Chapter 9, in particular, contains a masterful reading of Quine's "Epistemology Naturalized". This chapter, like many of the other chapters of the book, is largely a reprint of an already-published article. Thus, the justification for collecting these chapters into a book, it seems to me, should consist largely in the connections drawn between the material presented in the individual chapters. And, unfortunately, this is where the book comes up short. The problem is not that there are no substantive connections between the book's chapters, but rather that it is left almost entirely up to the reader to draw them. Consequently, while the individual chapters are, typically, very clearly and carefully argued, the book as a whole comes off as rather disjointed. I'll illustrate this point with some more specific discussion of the connections that Johnsen asserts to exist between Hume and his twentieth-century fellow travelers.

First, consider Johnsen's claim that Hume discovered the reflective equilibrium theory of epistemic justification. Johnsen's account of reflective equilibrium is a generalization of Goodman's approach to justifying inductive inferences, according to which a body of general principles and particular judgments is in reflective equilibrium—and thereby justified—by undergoing the "delicate [process] of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences" (Goodman 1983, 64). On Johnsen's view, "*theories* and *facts* (or *judgments* of fact) . . . are brought into equilibrium; [Goodman's view] is the special case in which the "*theories*" in question are *rules*, and the judgments concern individual *inferences*" (109 fn. 3, emphasis in original). After going through several iterations, Johnsen settles on the following formulation of the reflective equilibrium theory of epistemic justification.

The process of justification is the delicate one of maximizing overall fitness and minimizing the sacrifice of independent credibility in

a consistent and empirically significant body of beliefs about how things are and how they appear to be; in the satisfaction of these aims lies the only justification needed for any belief belonging to it.
(192)

Whatever its merits as a theory of epistemic justification, it is not clear to me that there is good reason to think that Hume would have accepted reflective equilibrium theory, as Johnsen claims. Johnsen's case for this claim rests largely on Hume's assertion, concerning his own philosophical arguments, that "we might hope to establish a system of opinions, which . . . might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination" (Hume 1978, T 1.4.7, 272).¹ As stated, this is plausibly an account of epistemic justification, but it is far from clear that it is an account of reflective equilibrium theory. What, on Hume's view, is supposed to be in equilibrium with what? Presumably, the individual elements of a person's "system of opinions" are supposed to be brought into equilibrium, but are these elements "*theories*" and "*facts*" (or judgments of fact) as Johnsen emphasizes? Johnsen does not answer this question. He provides interesting evidence in favor of the claim that Hume held that a person's body of beliefs is justified when it instantiates certain theoretical virtues—including virtues like simplicity and explanatory power—but this does not suffice to show that Hume would have accepted the reflective equilibrium theory of justification that Johnsen teases out of the work of Popper, Goodman, and Quine.

Second, let's consider what Johnsen takes to be Hume's other major epistemological discovery, namely, what Johnsen calls "*the* argument for radical skepticism concerning the external world" (HRSE).² Johnsen articulates this argument as follows.

¹Page references to Hume's *Treatise* are to the second (1978) Selbe-Bigge edition.

²"HRSE", as far as I can tell, stands for "Humean argument for radical skepticism concerning the external world" (58).

- (i) My evidence concerning the constitution of reality consists of my knowledge of the content of my conscious states, including my sensory states.
- (ii) Any rational basis I could have for any belief about the nature of any part of reality not described in my evidence would have to include *a priori* knowledge of, or at least *a priori* reason to believe in the existence of, some particular (sort of) relation—whether of similarity, dissimilarity, causation, or what have you—between the facts described in my evidence and the remainder of reality.
- (iii) I have no such *a priori* knowledge or reason.
Hence,
- (iv) I have no rational basis on which to believe anything about any part of reality not described by my evidence. (ii, iii)
Hence,
- (v) I have no rational basis on which to believe that there is an external world. (iv) (64)

Johnsen claims that this argument is “an adaption of Hume’s reasoning in Section IV of the *Enquiry*”, so he credits Hume with its discovery (58). I do not take issue with Johnsen on this claim (though Hume scholars might!). But I think there is ground to dispute Johnsen’s claim that Popper, Goodman, and Quine would all accept this argument. I will focus on Quine in particular.

The first thing to note about HRSE is that there is a gap between (iv) and (v) as stated. In order to infer (v) from (iv) we must also have the claim that our evidence is entirely *internal*; that is, that a person’s evidence does not “describe” an *external* world. This is, I take it, the claim of premise (i). Thus, (v) does not follow from (iv) alone, but only from (i) and (iv) taken together. There is good reason to believe that Hume would accept

(i), since, as Johnsen notes, Hume holds that “nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas, and . . . external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion” (Hume 1978, T 1.2.6, 67). However, it is far from clear that Quine would accept (i). After all, Quine explicitly says that our evidence consists ultimately of sensory stimulations: “The stimulations of his sensory receptors are all the evidence anybody has to go on, ultimately, in arriving at his picture of the world” (75). And, of course, stimulations of our sensory receptors are not part of the content of our conscious states.

Johnsen is fully aware that Quine says that our evidence consists of sensory stimulations. In a fascinating discussion of Quine’s views on evidence in chapter 10, Johnsen argues that, in fact, this cannot be Quine’s view. Instead, Johnsen argues, “Quine thought of our sensory experiences *and* the stimulations of our sensory receptors *and* our observations as ‘all the evidence we have to go on’” (179, emphasis in original). What Johnsen means by this is that “from one context to another [Quine] shifted from one aspect, or manifestation, to another of what was for him . . . essentially a unitary phenomenon: our sensory contact with the world” (179). Moreover, Johnsen argues that for Quine our sensory experiences—one “aspect” of our evidence about the world—include experiences of our own conscious states, which in turn provide us with highly certain introspective knowledge of our neuroperceptual brain states. This introspective knowledge is, on Johnsen’s reading, our “ultimate evidence concerning how the world is” (186).

That Quine would even consider such introspective knowledge is quite surprising indeed, but Johnsen summons interesting textual evidence in favor of this reading. Johnsen argues that Quine countenances both “objective” and “subjective” observation sentences. Essentially, the difference is that objective observation sentences are of the form “*a* is *F*” whereas subjective observation sentences are of the form “*a* looks *F*”. Johnsen

cites several pieces of textual evidence in favor of this distinction, including Quine's replies to various critics, as well as personal correspondence (149, 166). In addition, Johnsen points out that, by Quine's lights, for any objective observation sentence, there will be a corresponding subjective observation sentence. If "the cup is blue" commands assent from almost all linguistically competent speakers on a particular occasion, so will "the cup looks blue" (166–67). Interestingly, Johnsen's point appears to be further supported by some literature that he did not engage with, namely, Quine's remarks in his 1980 Kant Lectures, *Science and Sensibilia*, which only became available after the publication of Johnsen's book.³ In Lecture III, Quine argues that, while observation sentences are "typically . . . about the external world, rather than sensory events", the "whole domain of physicalistic observation sentences immediately gives rise also to a domain of mentalistic counterparts that are observation sentences as well, but observation sentences about other minds" (Quine 2019, 53). Quine's reasoning for this claim is as follows.

[If] '*p*' is an observation sentence, we can teach it by ostension. To do so, we must be able to judge that the pupil is having a perception appropriate to his asserting or assenting to the sentence '*p*'. We must be able to presume this from his orientation and other outward signs. But this makes '[the pupil] perceives that *p*' an observation sentence as well. (Quine 2019, 54)

This suggests that, for Quine, every objective observation sentence ("about the external world") has a "mentalistic counterpart" about "sensory events"; i.e., what Johnsen calls a subjective observation sentence.

But how can Quine countenance subjective observation sentences, containing as they do mentalistic predicates like "looks" or "perceives that"? The answer, as Johnsen rightly notes, is that Quine is happy to reconstrue such predicates in terms of neuro-perceptual states. And how can we recognize mental states such

as a person's having a certain sensory experience? Quine's answer, in *Science and Sensibilia* and elsewhere, is that mental states are, like diseases, diagnosable in terms of their symptoms, even if their underlying mechanisms are unknown. In the case of diagnosing mental states in others, the relevant symptoms are behavior. That is, we diagnose that Tom perceives that it is raining by observing "his orientation and outward signs". But, what about *first-person* subjective observation sentences; observation sentences concerning our own mental states, as opposed to the mental states of others? According to Johnsen, Quine's view is that we can recognize our own mental states simply by introspection. And Johnsen does marshal textual evidence in favor of this surprising claim. In his "Reply to Arnold Levison," for instance, Quine claims that "the handiest symptom [of one's own neural processes] is afforded by introspection, to which I am more receptive than Levison thinks" (Quine 1986a, 335). For example, if a cup looks blue to me, this is a symptom that "I am in a neural state commonly induced by the sight of [a blue cup]" (Quine 1986a, 336).

Thus, Johnsen argues, Quine can take sensory *experience*—how things look to us—seriously as a source of evidence. And, from our own perspective—"the standpoint of the theory that is being built" (Quine 1960, 22)—this constitutes the evidence that we take ourselves to have for our "comprehensive world views" (181). On this view, Quine's assertion that the stimulations of our sensory receptors constitute our evidence is thus "an enormous expository blunder on Quine's part" (182). What Quine actually had in mind, Johnsen argues, is that "the stimulations of a physical human organism's sensory organs are all *it* has had to go on in navigating and coping with its environment" (182). That is, in "Epistemology Naturalized" what Quine is doing is, *in part*, to reorient epistemology to a study of the relationship between the outputs of a physical organism and the inputs of its physical environment. But this is not to reconceive what *evidence* is. According to Quine's naturalism, Johnsen argues, facts are evi-

³Thanks to Gary Ebbs for bringing these lectures to my attention.

dence for theories “only by virtue of our taking them to be such” (181). And, only a *psychological* subject—as opposed to a “merely physical subject” (187)—can *take* anything to be evidence at all. Thus, naturalized epistemology requires the positing not only of a physical subject, but also a psychological subject; a subject who can take their sensory experiences to provide evidence for their theories.

Johnsen’s novel reading of Quine’s epistemology, of which I have offered only a sketch here, will no doubt strike many readers of Quine as obviously wrong—it so struck me at first—but Johnsen does bring surprising textual evidence to bear in favor of his interpretation. Still, I think there are some problems with Johnsen’s interpretation of Quine. I will briefly discuss three.

First, while Quine speaks positively of introspection as a means by which we can recognize our own neurological states in his replies to Levison (Quine 1986a) and Strawson (Quine 1986b), he is significantly less sanguine when he takes up the same topic in *Word and Object*. There, he writes that the only case there could be for positing mental states and events is that it would have “some indirect systematic efficacy in the development of theory.” But Quine thinks that any gains to be had by positing mental states and events could be “achieved by positing merely certain correlative physiological states and events instead.” He concludes that “introspection *may* be seen as a witnessing to one’s own bodily condition, as in introspecting an acid stomach,” but only if one feels the need to posit mental states and events to be introspected in the first place. And, Quine argues, there appears to be no good reason to do that: “The bodily states exist anyway; why add the others?” (Quine 1960, 264, my emphasis)

Second, the textual evidence for Johnsen’s claims about subjective observation sentences is, at best, ambiguous. Recall that, on Johnsen’s reading, reports about how things seem to us—first-person subjective observation sentences—are reports of our “ultimate evidence concerning how the world is” (186). Johnsen bases this reading largely on Quine’s brief discussion of the ob-

servation sentence “This looks blue” in his “Response to Bergström” (Quine 2000). But Quine’s discussion there does not make it clear that sentences like this are evidentially more fundamental than other observation sentences. In his response to Bergström, Quine does allow that “This looks blue” is an observation sentence and is “perhaps minimally theoretic” (Quine 2000, 413). But he quickly clarifies that observation sentences in general are “already theoretic to varying degrees . . . [and they] vie with one another in a surging equilibrium of evidential claims” (Quine 2000, 414). Thus, contrary to Johnsen’s claim that they are reports of our ultimate evidence about the world, Quine does not seem to allow any *special* evidential status to first-person subjective observation sentences.

Third, Johnsen does not provide any clear argument for the claim that Quine would accept HRSE, the Humean argument for radical skepticism concerning the external world. Johnsen does quote Quine claiming that “Hume’s negative doctrine is inevitable, I think, in any thorough-going empiricism” (Quine 2008, 94–95). But it is far from clear whether Quine’s apparent acceptance of “Hume’s negative doctrine” amounts to the same thing as Quine’s acceptance of the argument HRSE that Johnsen takes to be implicit in Hume’s work. This is in part because, for reasons I mentioned above, it is far from clear that Quine would accept premise (i) of HRSE, according to which a person’s evidence consists of their knowledge of the content of their conscious states. I would have appreciated more specific argumentation to support the claim that Quine—along with Popper and Goodman—accepted Hume’s argument as Johnsen understands it.

As a final critical note, in general I would have liked to have seen more engagement with secondary literature in Johnsen’s book. His discussion of Quine helpfully engages with Hylton (2007), but most of that engagement is relegated to footnotes. This problem shows up in most of the book, but is perhaps most notable in Johnsen’s discussion of Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty*.

This chapter offers a novel reading of Wittgenstein according to which his epistemological views are much closer to Quine's than one might have originally suspected. But, and perhaps this is because Johnsen's reading of Wittgenstein is so far outside the mainstream (195 fn. 5), Johnsen does not discuss much of the vast literature on Wittgenstein, either from epistemologists or historians of analytical philosophy.

Despite my critical remarks, I hope that this review has conveyed that there is a lot to like in this book. Johnsen's writing is clear, at times delightfully blunt, and typically a pleasure to read. He offers a bold picture of the epistemological views of Hume, Popper, Goodman, and Quine, and sets those views in a context framed by Sextus Empiricus and Wittgenstein. Even though readers are largely left to fill in the connections between those views for themselves, they have much to gain from doing so.

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