

Book Review

Exemplars of Truth

By Keith Lehrer.

New York, Oxford University Press, 2019.

pp. 155. ISBN 978-0-190-88427-7 Hardcover \$62.62.

A Review By

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Keith Lehrer has long been appreciated for his critical exposition of epistemology in the world of literature in analytic philosophy since the 1970s. He has been considered an illustrious philosopher who offers a coherentist theory of epistemic justification with a number of arguments against foundationalist theories. For example, he offered his argument against the possibility of incorrigible beliefs which are able to guarantee their own truth (Lehrer, 1974: 101-102). Moreover, with an innovative tale of Mr. Truetemp, he could point out that for a person to acquire correct information, and for her to know full well that the information was correct, it could not undoubtedly guarantee that she already had knowledge about it (Lehrer, 1990: 163-165).

In this present book, Lehrer offers a comprehensive summary of his systematic philosophy throughout his long career path into some sort of new unification effort through different gradients of topics including knowledge, self-trust, self-governance (autonomy), consciousness, representation of the world, etc. (pp. 1-2). The new unification here is involved with his newly offered concept of truth considered from an exemplar which is “something like a sample that becomes a vehicle of representation” (p.4).

Philosophical issues regarding epistemic justification are about how we are to give our proof when we claim that knowledge is acquired. If there truly is an infallible ground or some sort of clear and distinct knowledge from which some other chunk of knowledge can be inferred, then the foundationalist theories of epistemic justification are correct. In contrast, if there are no such grounds, and every chunk of knowledge is to depend on each other in a holistic complexity for it to be warranted, then the coherentist theories of epistemic justification are correct.

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However, if there are some arguments against the coherentist theories that some of those beliefs may be erroneous, and that when one can truly claim at least the very intuition of sensibility when one is perceiving something cannot be erroneous, then coherentist theories are wrong to argue that there can be none of the grounds. Nevertheless, as a coherentist, Lehrer offers what he calls “*defensibility theory of knowledge*” to explain when one claims that one knows something, it means that one must have a reason from one’s self-trust to accept it, i.e., one must be justifiable in a manner of being able to give a reason to defend why one chooses to accept that belief. This is considered the “*First First Principle*” that is already for everyone to do the task of differentiating truth from error (pp. 6-8, Lehrer’s italics).

So, what role are exemplars of representation to do with Lehrer’s coherentist theory of justification? Lehrer’s talk about Dante and the smell of a skunk is a clear example. It is told that Dante has not seen any skunks, but now he has a sensation of smelling some weird odor around him. Beatrice tells him that it is the spray of a skunk that might have been there before, but now it ran away. Dante does have a knowledge of that odor about what it smells like, and from Beatrice’s testimony, he can identify the smell with a species of animal which is called a skunk although he does not have knowledge of what it looks like. From this individual sensational experience, or in Lehrer’s vocabulary “an exemplar” of representation, Dante already has some knowledge about that animal species, and he has his justification of the distinct knowledge of what the smell of a skunk is (pp. 27-35). The individual smell of a skunk which is used as an exemplar of representation here is “to refer to itself” in a reflexive manner, and it is to represent the whole class of object of knowledge which is called a species of skunk. Therefore, Dante is now acquiring some sensational knowledge from the external world via the process of “exemplarization” (pp. 41-51).

It is with the very reason that exemplarization is a reflexive process, therefore, it needs no grounds. Lehrer describes this characteristic as “the truth loop” when a semantic entity expressed by a token of a sentence is to represent the external truth (pp.126-128). Again, this is to emphasize that there are no grounds when one is to justify beliefs, and how those beliefs are to be correctly described in language for them to be knowledgeable. Lehrer adds up that the phenomena of acceptance are always involved with one’s preference, and with a reason to prefer, it then means that it is reasonable for that one to accept the belief. The reason is trustworthy at least to the very one who is about to make a judgment of accepting something (pp. 131-133).

There is one topic from Lehrer's that I am still curious about. It is the connection between the specific exemplar of representation and its related general knowledge. From what Lehrer tells us the process of exemplarization is close to Nelson Goodman's nominalistic exemplification. However, Lehrer's exemplars are to refer to itself and the other objects in the same sort as well while Goodman's sample in the exemplification is not to refer to the sample itself (*pp. 36-37*). This line of nominalistic reasoning could be contaminated with a problem of resemblance explanation, i.e., with what reason for it to be justified that the sample and its related objects could be fitted into the same category. Are we begging the question by saying that they are in the same resemblance class because they resemble each other?

By the way, Lehrer's style of philosophizing for a theory of knowledge is creditable of attention. In my opinion, Lehrer did a very good work of benefiting from a number of contradictory philosophical stances. Thomas Reid's foundationalism and Wilfrid Sellars' coherentism can be considered a rival to each other. Lehrer finds out that the two philosophers are converged to the same point of concerning about noninferentiality of explanation (*pp. 112-115*). This activity of analysis shows that Lehrer works hard enough to have an insight that yields a presentation of something new and interesting.

References

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