



AFTER CERTAINTY: A HISTORY OF OUR EPISTEMIC IDEALS AND ILLUSIONS. By Robert Pasnau. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 384. Soft Cover \$40.95, ISBN: 978-0-19-885218-6; Hard Cover \$88.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-880178-8.

It is only in recent philosophical history that epistemology, unlike logic, metaphysics of the mind, ethics, etc., has been identified as a distinct philosophical discipline. Additionally, there can seem to be a significant gap between the priority historically assigned to certitude within theories of knowledge and the priority many contemporary epistemologists, such as fallibilists, assign to certitude. In spite of these puzzling observations, the historical development of epistemology has been strangely neglected by scholars. Pasnau seeks to fill this lacuna by situating the state of contemporary epistemology relative to its historical roots and uncovering why there was such a seemingly radical transition in the role of certitude in accounts of knowledge. The book is divided into six lectures.

In the *first lecture* Pasnau gives a narrative to identify a crucial paradigm shift in our epistemic ideals. He thinks that the “ideal limit of human inquiry” that dominated Western thought for two thousand years was given by Aristotle in his *Posterior Analytics* (3). *Epistēmē* (*scientia* in Latin) involved knowing the essences of substances through their causes with certitude (6). Interestingly, Pasnau suggests that the seventeenth century shift in epistemic ideals was primarily because of skepticism towards Aristotle’s metaphysics, not his epistemology. Of those who reject his metaphysics, some retain Aristotle’s epistemic ideal but

simply hold that *epistēmē* is impossible. Others like Galileo and Newton no longer regard the grasping of essences of natural substances as an epistemic ideal. For such thinkers, knowledge of the properties of substances (such as location, motion, shape, etc.) becomes the new *scientia* or epistemic ideal, more modest in scope but more precise (14).

The *second lecture* is an account of how epistemology as a discipline came to be concerned with marking the boundary between knowledge and non-knowledge. Ultimately, Pasnau thinks this pull towards demarcating boundary conditions can be laid at the feet of three individually plausible but mutually inconsistent ideas that emerged through Aristotle’s medieval interpreters: the principle of proportionality (that assent ought to be proportioned to one’s evidence), pessimism over our ability to achieve infallible certainty, and the conviction that we are often entitled to believe absolutely without doubt (42). One of these three had to go, and, so Pasnau argues, the principle of proportionality got cut. Nevertheless, the need to indicate when assent is warranted remains. The boundary between knowledge and non-knowledge took the place of proportionality in fulfilling this role (45).

*Third*, Pasnau examines our epistemic ideals regarding the senses. The Aristotelian tradition treated qualities or sensibles as fundamental causal

agents at work within the world; they caused sensation in suitable creatures (55). The mechanistic worldviews of the seventeenth century typically viewed fundamental causal agents to be the quantitative properties of bodies that take up space, or “primary qualities” (59). Traditional Aristotelian qualities became “secondary qualities” and were reduced to mere mental existence. After this quantitative turn, the “fidelity of the senses” (the claim that sensation indicates something of the character of the body perceived) was compromised (65).

In the *fourth lecture* Pasnau advances what he thinks is the chief reason many seventeenth century authors turn to inner objects of perception: they are looking for some domain in which they can preserve the Aristotelian epistemic ideal (71). Inner objects are plausible candidates for things that can be known infallibly because we are directly aware of their existence (75). This era develops the notion of “mediated perception” whereby external objects are perceived “only in virtue of perceiving something within ourselves” (73). The rise of mediated perception, Pasnau argues, was “a direct result of the secondary qualities’ losing their status as real, physical, external-world causes” (89). He ultimately thinks that rather than making an inward turn, the best course available is to abandon the commitment to high fidelity of the senses and face the fact that the senses can err (93).

More briefly, *lecture five* considers our tendency to privilege our first-person present perspective when weighing evidence rather than our “past self” or the views of others. He then argues, criticizing Descartes, that there is little reason to privilege the present self (110). In *lecture six*, Pasnau argues that uncer-

tainty is built into the very capacity for cognition. For example, it is not even possible for God to be above all doubt (121). Pasnau seriously considers but does not endorse or deny the claim that evidence will never be any good because it is “always conditional on taking for granted certain things or ignoring others, and that these assumptions, tacit or explicit, cannot themselves ultimately be supported by good evidence” (128). This idea that all reasons are eventually question begging because we can never overcome the gap between seemings and reality he calls “epistemic defeatism.” Coupled with the thesis that we should only hold a belief if it is warranted by sufficient evidence, epistemic defeatism entails that we should suspend all belief (131) because we can never have sufficient evidence. Recognizing that our beliefs and hopes “will ultimately be grounded in something other than objective evidence” (137), Pasnau optimistically recommends that we look upon these dim prospects with hope and “a cheerful willingness not to worry about the all-too-possible bad scenarios” (138).

The sheer breadth of Pasnau’s project and the precision with which he carries it out is a testament to his knowledge and skill as a historian of philosophy. His previous work uniquely situates him to write on the medieval-to-modern transition in epistemology, and he is to be praised for the seriousness with which he takes the medievals. The book’s value, however, goes far beyond mere history and will be of interest to contemporary epistemologists. In clarifying the origins of contemporary issues, it is a great aid to evaluating current debates in the field. This historical view towards epistemology is extremely unique in a discipline that tends to focus on close, technical

analysis of particular concepts like knowledge and justification.

The primary text itself is pleasantly concise, something unusual for Pasnau. However, the physical book still ends up being fairly large as the endnotes (closer to appendices) more than double the book in size. Pasnau recommends reading each lecture and then its endnotes, an approach I would recommend as well. In terms of content, the footnotes contain helpful historical details, but each chapter can be understood without reference to the endnotes. This was a wise choice, making the book accessible to both readers who simply want a broad historical take on epistemology as well as those interested in Pasnau's detailed historical interpretations.

While the middle two chapters contain penetrating studies; the first two are particularly valuable because much of their content speaks to where the ideal of certainty came from and the emergence of epistemology as a contemporary discipline. The fifth and sixth chapters were less valuable. Lecture five, for example, focuses on a much narrower issue instead of taking the wide perspective that made the first four chapters so valuable. It would have been a natural course to follow up an examination of our epistemic ideals in the senses (lecture four) with an examination of our epistemic ideals in the category of our capacity to reason. It is disappointing that we missed Pasnau's historical narration on this point.

As already mentioned, Pasnau advances the claim that even God cannot have absolute certitude. It should be noted that his major claims do not de-

pend upon this more controversial one. Regarding this point, however, perhaps our inability to distinguish between seemings and reality is due to our cognitive dependence upon sense experience rather than the nature of cognition itself. This does not seem implausible given how little experience we have of God or His cognitive capacities. If indubitable cognition remains a possibility, it seems reasonable to think that God is capable of it (even if we cannot understand how) because God is perfect, and it is more perfect to know without doubt.

As mentioned above, Pasnau adopts a hopeful attitude in spite of our dim cognitive prospects. But if Pasnau's suggestions that evidence can never be "any good" or that we can ground hope in something other than objective evidence are true, then how can our hopeful attitude amount to little more than just arbitrarily wishing for whatever we want? Similarly, Pasnau presumably wrote *After Certainty* so that his readers would believe some things rather than others. But, if there is so little reason to think that our evidence and experiences help us to discern what is true, then why should we put much stock in Pasnau's arguments for the truth of the various things he argues for?

In conclusion, *After Certainty* offers great insight for readers interested in the history of epistemology for its own sake as well as for those who wish to mine these insights for contemporary application.

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