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Editors' Preface

Book Symposium on Ayers' Knowing and Seeing (OUP 2019)

Naomi Osorio-Kupferblum | ORCID: 0000-0003-2399-7002

Universität Wien, Vienna, Austria

naomi.osorio@univie.ac.at

Mira Magdalena Sickinger | ORCID: 0000-0001-7188-354X

Universität Wien, Vienna, Austria

mira.magdalena.sickinger@univie.ac.at

The Book Symposium prefaced by these lines is for several reasons particularly dear to our hearts. It grew out of a live symposium in February 2020, one of the last to be held *in person* at the University of Vienna before the pandemic, and an event that brought together some of our favourite philosophers. Maria Rosa Antognazza, Tom Crowther, Guy Longworth, Rory Madden, and Charles Travis contributed papers, Sofia Miguens was a commentator, and several others, including Hannah Ginsborg, Menno Lievers, and Udo Thiel, took part in the debates on the pre-read papers. These were introduced by comments from Nikolaus Peschl, Barbara Haas, Mira Magdalena Sickinger, Arnaud de Coster and Paul Tucek, participants in a graduate seminar during the months leading up to the symposium. The event also marked the starting point for the FWF-funded project T-1103 entitled “Is Meaning a Response-Dependent Property?” and was co-organised by its PI Naomi Osorio-Kupferblum and the Vienna Forum of Analytic Philosophy, specifically Leonie Holzner and Anna-Maria Edlinger as well as Paul Tucek, then the Forum's chairman.

The book this has been all about, Michael Ayers' *Knowing and Seeing* (OUP 2019), is immensely rich and inspiring. In it, Ayers expounds his epistemology – what knowledge is, how we come to have it, and why the sceptic can't undermine it. Along the way, he deals with many aspects of perception, language, methodology, and in part also metaphysics. Now, many readers will be familiar with some of his views, for instance from discussions in his claim to fame, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (Routledge 1991a), from his first book, *The Refutation of Determinism* (Methuen 1968, Routledge 2018), from his introductions to Berkeley's *Philosophical Works Including the Works on Vision* (Dent

1975) and *Rationalism, Platonism and God* (OUP 2007), which he edited, or the 2-volume *Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (CUP 2003), co-edited with Daniel Garber, or else from some of his numerous papers which appeared in various venues, most prominently perhaps “Ordinary objects, ordinary language, and identity” (2005), “Sense experience, concepts and content – objections to Davidson and McDowell” (2004), “What are we to say to the Cartesian Sceptic?” (2003), or his much earlier “Substance: prolegomena to a realist theory of identity” (1991b). To them, it may be said that Ayers is still the common-sense empiricist and ‘objects-first’ realist we’ve known.

However, he didn’t simply publish a collection of old papers, as is often done, even if annotated. Instead, Ayers took the trouble of writing a new book, re-engaging with characteristic fervour, vigour and rigor with what is surely the core interest of philosophy generally, and of his philosophy in particular: epistemology. In *Knowing and Seeing*, he thus presents his considered view on knowledge and how we come to have it in a neatly structured argument, thereby building the ‘groundwork for a new empiricism’ the book’s subtitle promises. Following a conceptualisation of knowledge, he explains how our own physicality and integrated sense perception situate us in the surroundings we thus perceive. As a result, when we know, we also know that and how we know – this is the primary form of knowledge. However, he also allows for ‘secondary knowledge’ grounded on primary knowledge. Ayers explains that knowledge doesn’t require concepts but that, conversely, the way we think and speak reflects the structure of reality with which perception puts us in direct cognitive contact. The book culminates in what is perhaps the best argument against epistemological scepticism without thereby yielding an inch with respect to the indubitability of knowledge, an argument that rests in good part on the important difference between certainty and indefeasibility.

The author being Michael Ayers, it is not surprising that a little potted history sets the scene; but that first chapter spans even farther than might otherwise have been expected thanks to its co-author, Maria Rosa Antognazza. She contributes important medieval and Continental-European perspectives to that chapter, and we are glad to have an article in this volume explaining where she differs from Ayers. The reader will find much more on the book’s content in Mira Magdalena Sickinger’s, and Sofia Miguens’ and Naomi Osorio-Kupferblum’s articles as well as Michael Ayers’ introduction to his replies.

The present Book Symposium begins with **Mira Magdalena Sickinger’s** article. She presses Ayers for an explanation of the term ‘cognition’, employed both in his notion of ‘cognitive contact’, which constitutes primary knowledge, and in ‘cognitive link’, which constitutes secondary knowledge. She asks whether

Ayers accepts or rejects that cognition requires a conscious act of thought or reasoning, e.g., to unify the manifold of perceptual experiences for providing the grounds for knowledge. In his reply, Ayers explains that cognition should not be thought of as something that occurs entirely within the mind, but rather as a process linking the object of thought with the thinker. Sickinger also asks whether the individual subject in Ayers' account is always able to explain their inferential knowledge, and furthermore, to what extent the subject is allowed to refer to 'collective knowledge' when it comes to secondary knowledge, given that everybody has to do (or explain) their own knowing. Ayers replies that often only a small part of the 'cognitive link' is 'perspicuous' to the knowing subject, so they are very much allowed to refer to other people and objects (historians, teachers, manuscripts, and the like) who have contributed to establishing that link.

Rory Madden's concern is with Ayers' argument that primary knowledge is perspicuous: primary knowledge of object *o* is knowledge of both that and how we know – it is, Madden says, *reflexive*. But this is incompatible with another aspect of primary knowledge: realism. Realism states that the objects of our knowledge are ontologically independent of our sensory awareness of them. But knowledge of how we know is not ontologically independent of our knowledge of object *o*. So the reflexive part of knowledge fails the requirement of realism. Madden therefore thinks that Ayers has to choose between reflexivity and realism. He proposes to give up realism for knowledge how we know and retain only the criterion of reflexivity. In his reply, Ayers rejects the separation of knowledge how we know from knowledge of *o* implicit in Madden's presentation of the worry, so that the incompatibility vanishes.

Maria Rosa Antognazza demands a distinction between first-person knowledge and self-knowledge. She agrees with Ayers that basic perceptual knowledge – his 'primary knowledge', Antognazza's 'first-person knowledge' – possesses a built-in KK principle. For Antognazza though, there is then a higher, second-order, reflective cognitive act in which the subject is capable of knowing herself, of reflecting on herself. Ayers responds that Antognazza describes proprioception or perception of one's own body as awareness of something 'other', whereas his account of sense-perceptual experiences regards these as permeated with an awareness of *oneself* as a perceiving, suffering, enjoying conscious being.

Guy Longworth questions the KK principle on which Ayers' account of knowledge rests. He looks at five aspects of the connection between a conscious source of knowledge and knowing that and how one knows. Specifically, he distinguishes between knowledge and sense perception, thereby undermining Ayers' account of primary knowledge, and between an experience's being

conscious and its being such that its subject is in a position to know that they are enjoying an experience of that type. In his reply, Ayers rejects Longworth's externalist worry and points to the distinction he draws between certainty and (in)defeasibility.

Menno Lievers focuses on Ayers' anti-conceptualism, to which he objects. His concern is that if the objects of knowledge are worldly objects rather than propositions, it is not clear how such non-conceptual knowledge relates to thought, and how perception relates to reason. He argues that Ayers has to supplement his theory of perception with a philosophy of mind alternative to the standard propositional-attitude account. Ayers counters that the idea that anything like Fregean 'concepts' must play a role in knowledge is an 'illusion of reason' due to the fact that when giving an account of what we perceive and thus know, we have to 'employ concepts'.

Charles Travis introduces his critique of *Knowing and Seeing* by describing the Austinian turn Oxford philosophy took in the 20th century, away from its earlier scepticism about knowledge of sublunary affairs. He explains that (i) given, e.g., a pig's presence on Benno's sofa, it is true that there is a pig on Benno's sofa; (ii) if the pig's presence counts as and is recognisably a pig's presence on Benno's sofa, it may serve as proof of a pig's presence on Benno's sofa; (iii) if it does, such proof is on a par with mathematical proof – things cannot be otherwise. Travis' criticism is now that Ayers' 'secondary knowledge' does not fulfil (iii) and should therefore not count as knowledge at all. Concerning perception, Travis makes reference to Frege, stressing the importance of distinguishing *being true* (a property of thoughts or propositions) from *holding true* (something people may do), and the conceptual from what may fall under such concepts. As a result, the objects of 'awareness that' [something is the case] are completely different in kind from objects of perceptual awareness. Travis sees this distinction blurred in *Knowing and Seeing*. Finally, Travis takes issue with Ayers' criticism of McDowell's disjunctivism. In his reply, Ayers defends his view that there is pre-conceptual perceptual knowledge, not least when one recognises someone or something. Moreover, the distinction between awareness-that and perceptual awareness is not as clear-cut as Travis claims. Concerning the worry about secondary knowledge, he refers back to his distinction between certainty (which entails truth, but not vice-versa) and (in)defeasibility. It is this distinction that he also finds missing in McDowell's disjunctivism.

In their article, **Sofia Miguens** and **Naomi Osorio-Kupferblum** shed light on some of the background to this debate between Ayers and Travis. They compare and contrast Ayers' and Travis' views on perception, knowledge and

language, highlighting the motives that lead the authors to similar stances, as, for instance, realism, anti-conceptualism and anti-representationalism, but do so often for diverging reasons. Miguens and Osorio-Kupferblum explain the primordial role ordinary objects play in Ayers' philosophy and the similarly great importance of occasion sensitivity in Travis' views, and they contrast Travis' anti-psychologism with Ayers' empiricist epistemology reliant on his $\kappa\kappa$ principle. Hopefully useful as a *vade mecum* (not only for the uninitiated), the article's main intention is to make precise the scope of the debate between these two leading figures in the field.

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