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Epistemology Without Concepts?

Penelope Maddy, What Do Philosophers Do? Skepticism and the Practice of Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, xi + 248pp, $29.95, HB

Santiago Echeverri
Department of Philosophy
Rutgers – School of Arts and Sciences
106 Somerset St – 5th Floor
New Brunswick NJ 08901

santiagoecheverri@hotmail.com

What do philosophers do? Penelope Maddy sets out to answer this question in this lucid and enjoyable book—a collection of her Romanell-Phi Beta Kappa lectures. In a nutshell: Philosophers investigate "questions without a home in any other discipline" (220). Maddy focuses on one perennial philosophical question: How do we come to know anything at all about the world around us? This question has often led philosophers to embrace some form of skepticism. Maddy tries to show how the methods employed by philosophers like John Austin, G. E. Moore, Thomas Reid, and Ludwig Wittgenstein can be fruitfully used to avoid the skeptical conclusion. Maddy revisits two skeptical arguments: The Dream Argument (Chapter 1) and The Argument from Illusion (Chapter 2). The Infinite Regress of Justification and the Closure Argument are briefly presented in two appendices. Chapter 3 knits together the results from previous chapters and addresses the deontological question: What *should* philosophers do? Maddy's suggestion is provocative: Philosophers should not indulge in the sort of conceptual analysis that has been prominent in post-Gettier

epistemology, in which philosophers have used increasingly farfetched cases to test complex definitions of knowledge. For Maddy, that research program has led philosophers to get involved in "odd diversionary issues" (206).

What should epistemologists do, if not analyze the concept of knowledge? They should try to understand the world and our place in it by employing other methods. Maddy presents those methods by means of some idealized characters. The *Plain Man* relies on common sense to tell us when we have gone wrong (209). The *Plain Inquirer* "conducts an empirical investigation: beginning from everyday observation, progressing to systematic gathering of data and deliberate experimentation, then eventually to theory formation and testing…" (210). The *Ordinary Language Philosopher* "explores the 'what we would say when' to uncover the subtleties and distinctions and hard-worn wisdom embedded in our use of ordinary terms" (210–11). The *Therapist* diagnoses "argumentative slips, […] unmotivated presuppositions, and plain acts of inattention and carelessness" (201). And the *Historian of Ideas*—the name is mine—examines "the historical roots of a given philosophical persuasion, to see whether it might have been generated by constraints that are no longer with us" (213). If we employ these methods, the project of testing complex definitions of knowledge against farfetched scenarios will seem less appealing to us.

It is hard to be unsympathetic with the main thrust of Maddy's attack on post-Gettier epistemology. Her original study of the Argument from Illusion (Chapter 2) and her intriguing interpretation of Moore's proof of an external world (Chapter 3)

reveal the benefits of the methods she recommends. Alas, Maddy also flirts with a radical and less plausible claim: that there is no such a thing as 'the concept of knowledge'. Unfortunately, this view does not seem to be supported by good reasons.

The offending claim comes onto the scene in Maddy's assessment of Barry Stroud's (1984) influential defense of the Dream Argument (Chapter 1). Very roughly, the argument has the following form:

> *Premise 1.* To have perceptual knowledge of everyday propositions like 'I have hands', one needs to rule out the hypothesis that one is dreaming now.
> *Premise 2.* One cannot rule out the hypothesis that one is dreaming now.
> *Conclusion.* So, one cannot have perceptual knowledge of everyday propositions like 'I have hands'.

As Maddy rightly points out, there are two ways of understanding Stroud's defense of the argument. On one reading, Stroud relies on the hypothesis of 'extraordinary dreaming': "The idea is that *all* this might be a dream, the whole rigmarole of apparent dreaming and waking, of apparently observing and exploring what happens when people sleep" (31). If we were in an extraordinary dream, we could not rule out the hypothesis that we are dreaming now. After all, "any evidence [we] might offer could just be part of the same all-encompassing extraordinary dream" (33). On another reading, the argument does not require the hypothesis of extraordinary dreaming but rather that one can justify, 'from scratch', one's belief that one is not

dreaming now. The 'from scratch' requirement follows from a conception of philosophy as a very general type of inquiry that seeks to understand "how *any* knowledge of an independent world is gained". On this view, "we cannot appeal to some piece of knowledge we think we have already got about an independent world" (Stroud 1996: 132; 71 n 49).

If Stroud's argument was sound, the methods available to the Plain Man (who finds the conclusion unappealing) or the Plain Inquirer (who investigates the psychological and neurological differences between dream and waking life) would be ineffective to avoid the skeptical conclusion. Still, Austin's Ordinary Language Philosophy might seem to be untouched by Stroud's argument. A standard reading of Austin depicts him as eliciting some features of the concept of knowledge from our linguistic practices. On this interpretation, the Dream Argument presupposes a too demanding concept of knowledge. Unfortunately, Stroud has an answer to that line of thought. On Stroud's view, Austin's approach conflates two different issues: whether an epistemic requirement is false and whether it is 'outrageous' because it violates some of Grice's (1967) conversational norms. The Dream Argument certainly introduces an outrageous requirement; we do not normally ask a chemist to "include an appendix to his report that rules out dreaming" (52). Nevertheless, it does not follow from that observation that the requirement is false. That requirement could be implicit in our ordinary concept of knowledge once it is isolated from the practical limitations of ordinary life (57).

Many philosophers have found Stroud's reply to Austin decisive. They are persuaded that Grice's work on conversational norms 'buried' Austin's ordinary language philosophy. Maddy thinks otherwise. According to Maddy, it is a mistake to think of Austin as trying to elicit a less demanding concept of knowledge from our linguistic practices. This would require a prior belief in the existence of concepts. But Austin "isn't out to investigate the features of the concept at all, because he doesn't believe in concepts […] the linguistic usage is all there is" (66). Maddy's point is not merely exegetical. She also thinks that Austin "is right here, on all counts" (66).

There is some reason to think that Maddy cannot *fully* agree with Austin. After all, Maddy accepts the existence of *some* concepts. Indeed, she enthusiastically mentions the scientific progress that followed from the precise analysis of the concepts of the continuum and simultaneity (214ff.). Hence, it seems more plausible to read Maddy as countenancing a limited form of 'conceptual skepticism'. But even the less radical reading seems unattractive: it is as if we had to trade a skepticism about the external world for another skepticism about the concept of knowledge. That is too high a price to pay, at least for this reader.

Maddy's defense of Austin hinges on an interpretation of the scope of ordinary language analysis. That method "is plainly preferable to investigate a field where ordinary language is rich and subtle, as it is in the practical matter of Excuses, but certainly is not in the matter, say, of Time" (Austin 1956: 182). Maddy thinks that "there is a difference in kind between everyday terms like 'know' and 'excuse', and theoretical terms like 'continuity' and 'simultaneity'" (219). Conceptual analysis,

understood as an investigation of the necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of concepts, is inadequate in the former case (214ff.).

Alas, Maddy is here operating with one of those "overly tidy dichotomies" (213) that Austin rightly warned us against. Why should we assume that the examples of Excuses and Time illustrate the only two ways of classifying our vocabulary? There could be many intermediary cases that neither clearly fall on the side of Excuses, nor clearly fall on the side of Time. These cases might lack the definiteness of the scientific concepts of the continuum and simultaneity but still have a relatively stable core that can be philosophically delineated.

Suppose that our mastery of 'knows' is underwritten by a graded concept (e.g., a prototype). On this approach, some 'exemplars' of knowledge are more central than the others. We could therefore say that many epistemologists have been investigating the properties of those central exemplars. Indeed, most exemplars of knowledge seem to have the following properties: 1) they are factive (*S*'s knowledge that *p* entails *p*), 2) they entail belief (*S*'s knowledge that *p* entails belief that *p*), 3) they exclude some form of luck (If *S* knows that *p*, it is not a matter of luck that *p* is true), and 4) they are epistemically more valuable than a corresponding true belief, even if the latter could serve us equally well. A view along these lines predicts the existence of cases in which the word 'know' is correctly used to characterize epistemic states that do not satisfy properties 1-4. It also predicts that the method of cases is of limited application. If the scenarios we use to test a definition of knowledge are merely possible or farfetched, they may not capture the properties of central

exemplars of knowledge. Yet, epistemologists could delineate a type of epistemic state that satisfies properties 1-4 and plays a central role in our epistemic practices.

This alternative approach seems preferable to Maddy's (local) conceptual skepticism. Those convinced by Austin's line of thought might reply that the Dream Argument articulates a requirement that central exemplars of knowledge do not need to fulfill. As Maddy herself points out, the Dream Argument partly depends "on taking dreaming in its ordinary, everyday sense when it's argued that it must be ruled out, then in an extraordinary sense when it's argued that it can't be ruled out" (73). We could explain this equivocation by holding that central exemplars of knowledge only require that the agent can rule out that she is ordinarily dreaming now.

Maddy might reply that only theoretical terms express concepts. Nevertheless, this requirement seems unmotivated. After all, the Plain Inquirer also wants to know how agents with minds like ours can acquire knowledge. In this respect, knowledge seems to be a case in which "our interests are more […] intellectual than the ordinary" (Austin 1956: 182). It is hard to imagine a more intellectual undertaking than an investigation into the possibility of knowledge. Of course, our concept of knowledge cannot be as precise as the concepts of the continuum and simultaneity. But that is no big surprise; a similar lack of precision is to be expected from many other concepts proper to other plain inquiries. The Plain Inquirer will not be deterred from pursuing a scientific study of delusions or emotions just because ordinary talk about belief and emotion is very subtle and variable in daily life.

To be fair, Maddy seems to be aware that her skepticism about the concept of knowledge would prevent the Plain Inquirer from investigating knowledge. So, she has a substitute at her disposal. The Plain Inquirer could still investigate the conditions under which people can acquire reliable information about the world (219). It is however unclear why this alternative project could be relevant to the original question: 'How do we come to *know* anything at all about the world around us?' My suspicion is that Maddy is dimly aware that her alternative goal captures some of the properties of paradigmatic forms of knowledge. Those central exemplars are factive and exclude some form of luck. Reliabilist analyses of knowledge were meant to capture those properties.

Although this reader disagrees with Maddy's conceptual skepticism, her book is a significant contribution to epistemology, meta-philosophy, and the history of ideas. She shows how epistemology can benefit from discussion of meta-philosophical issues and how historical investigation can uncover the motives behind some persistent views. Professional philosophers and the general audience will enjoy this book.

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