

Book reviews

The Realm of Reason, by Christopher Peacocke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 2004. Pp. vii + 284. H/b £40.00.

In this book, Christopher Peacocke develops a new form of rationalism ('generalized rationalism'), according to which all entitlement relations are fundamentally a priori (p. 2). The idea is that if a thinker is entitled to form a certain belief, there is an a priori norm that grounds such an entitlement. Peacocke argues for this view by formulating and supporting three 'principles of rationalism'.

Peacocke's Principle I, labelled 'The Special Truth-Conduciveness Thesis', states that:

A fundamental and irreducible part of what makes a transition one to which a thinker is entitled is that the transition tends to lead to true judgements (or, in the case where the transition relies on premises, tends to do so when its premises are true) in a distinctive way characteristic of rational transitions (p. 11).

Peacocke takes the relation of entitlement to apply primarily to transitions in thought and only derivatively to beliefs or judgements. By 'transition' Peacocke means any kind of transition, inferential or non-inferential. An inferential transition is, for instance, an argument. A non-inferential transition is, for instance, the transition one makes from a perceptual state to a perceptual content — e.g., the transition from one's perception of a red table to the judgement that that table is red.

If what is a priori is a way of arriving at some content, then, according to Peacocke, there are a priori ways of arriving at empirical contents. A transition from one of the thinker's conscious states to a content is an a priori transition if the thinker is entitled to accept that content independently of any other perceptual conscious states or perceptual contents (p. 26). For instance, the transition from a thinker's perception of a curved rod to the content 'that rod is curved' is an a priori transition, because the thinker comes to believe it relative to her experience of the rod as being curved. Contents arrived at by an a priori transition of this kind are called 'relatively a priori', it

'is a priori relative to the given perceptual state' (p. 26). By contrast, the content 'this rod is curved because it was heated' is not relatively a priori because the thinker would need more information than the one given by the perception of the curved rod.

But what makes a transition entitling? A transition that is reliably linked to truth, seems to be one to which a thinker is entitled. For instance, I have a prima-facie entitlement to believe in the content of my perceptual experience because perception is a reliable mechanism, one that is reliably linked to truth. However, Peacocke claims, the 'property of a transition of tending to lead to true judgements (or to do so when its premises are true) is not by itself enough to make a transition entitling.' (p. 11) So, what else is needed for a transition to be one to which a thinker is entitled?

According to Principle I, a transition is entitling if it is 'rationally truth-conductive' (p. 11). But what is a rationally truth-conductive transition? Principle II, 'the rationalist dependence thesis', is supposed to elucidate this by stating what is distinctive of a rational transition: 'the rational truth-conduciveness of any given transition to which a thinker is entitled is to be philosophically explained in terms of the nature of the intentional contents and states involved in the transition.' (p. 52). Peacocke's Principle III, 'The Generalized Rationalist Thesis', follows from Principles I and II by claiming that 'All instances of the entitlement relation, both absolute and relative, are fundamentally a priori' (p. 148). What this means is that if Peacocke is right, any instance of the entitlement relation that is a posteriori can be explained in a priori terms by appealing to the nature of the states and contents involved in the transition. Peacocke is not, of course, claiming that all relations of entitlement are a priori or that all contents are a priori, what he is claiming is that the explanation of such entitlements, or the proper 'philosophical explanation' of such entitlements, is a priori.

So, according to Principle I a transition is entitling if it is rationally truth-conductive; according to Principle II, the rationality of a transition can be explained by appealing to the identity of the states and to the nature of the contents involved in the transition; Principle III only adds that the rationality of all transitions have an a priori explanation. The question now is how are we to give an a priori explanation of the rationality of an a posteriori entitlement.

An a posteriori entitlement is an entitlement that depends on empirical information. A simple example of such an entitlement

would be my entitlement to believe that there is a red object in front of me by perceiving a red object in front of me. Peacocke claims that these sorts of experiences — the experience of a red object, the experience of a curved rod, etc. — are ‘instance-individuated’. These are experiences whose contents we are entitled to hold independently of any additional empirical information. (The contents of these instance-individuated experiences are those that are ‘relatively a priori’ in the sense explained above.) Examples of non-instance-individuated experiences are experiences like the experience of a Mac computer in front of me, or my perceptual experience of a piece of Swedish furniture. In these cases, additional empirical information is required — for instance, information about what is a Mac computer, or how Swedish furniture looks like — in order for one to be entitled to hold the contents of such experiences. Peacocke argues that we have a *prima-facie* entitlement (though defeasible) to hold the contents of our instance-individuated experiences in the absence of reasons for doubting: ‘What makes these perceptions have the content they do is the fact that when the subject is properly related to the world the holding of these contents causally explains such a perceptual experience of their holding.’ (p. 69). When a perceptual content is such that its individuation is causally explained by the very same conditions that explain its truth, we are rationally entitled to accept it, in the absence of reasons for doubting that we are not perceiving correctly or that the environmental conditions are abnormal — and this would be the *a priori* explanation of this sort of entitlement. But this argument only shows, at best, that if we are in a world in which the circumstances are normal, we are entitled to accept the content of our perceptions at face value (in the absence of reasons for doubt). To show that we are in such a world Peacocke settles himself the task of refuting sceptical scenarios — scenarios in which the world is not the way we perceive it to be.

With this aim in mind, Peacocke devotes a good amount of time to the refutation of scepticism about the external world. By doing this he aims to support the idea that only by *a priori* means can we explain our *a posteriori* entitlements — and that is why he takes all entitlement relations to be fundamentally *a priori*. If successful, Peacocke would also meet the strongest sceptical demand possible. He could overcome scepticism about the external world independently of any empirical information about the external world, which is something

that most philosophers have taken as an impossible demand to fulfil. But how does this work?

The first step of Peacocke's argument against scepticism consists in claiming that a good explanation must be able to show how a complex phenomenon *can easily come about*: that is, a good explanation must reduce complexity. For instance, take the complex phenomenon of Zebras having stripes. According to Peacocke, this is a complex phenomenon because Zebras only instantiate one of the multiple possible patterns that they could possess: dots, circles, only one colour, and so on. According to the 'Complexity Reducing Principle', 'Other things being equal, good explanations of complex phenomena explain the more complex in terms of the less complex; they reduce complexity' (p. 83). Now, it seems plausible to assume that perceptual experiences with representational contents are complex phenomena very much in need of an explanation — and a good explanation must explain these complex phenomena in a less complex way; it must reduce complexity. So, let us assume, like Peacocke seems to do, that this Complexity Reducing Principle is not contentious.

There are two types of sceptical scenarios: ones with intentional agents, and ones without intentional agents. Sceptical scenarios involving evil demons or mad scientists are of the first type. According to Peacocke, such scenarios cannot provide a complexity-reducing explanation of the contents of our perceptual experiences because they presuppose without explaining the existence of intentional agents with experiences with perceptual contents — leaving 'the residue of empirically unexplained complexity' (p. 90). Sceptical scenarios of the second sort are scenarios like the ones in which the universe has always consisted of permanently and eternally envatted brains (p. 91). In this kind of sceptical scenarios it is assumed that thinkers' perceptual experiences are non-veridical, and thus they do not seem to fulfil any epistemic role — all brains would be in a permanent state of hallucination. But, according to Peacocke, these sorts of scenarios seem to leave us with another empirically unexplained complexity, namely the very existence of perceptual experiences. In a world of envatted brains, the likely way for things to come about would be for there to be no perceptual experiences in the first place. Hence, the best explanation of the representational content of our perceptual experiences is that they came about as the result of the evolution of a cognitive faculty that has been selected through natural selection to produce, by and large, correct perceptual representations

about the empirical world. And so we are entitled to assume that we are in a world that is basically like we take it to be. Consequently, we are entitled to accept at face-value the content of our instance-individuated experiences in the absence of reasons for doubt.

So, Peacocke illustrates his generalized rationalism by giving an a priori explanation of our instance-individuated perceptual experiences. His explanation has roughly the following structure: (1) Perceptual experiences are complex phenomena; (2) A good explanation must reduce complexity; (3) The explanation that best reduces complexity is the natural selection explanation; (4) The natural selection explanation entails that the contents of our perceptual experiences are by and large correct, or veridical; (5) Therefore, we are entitled to take the contents of our perceptual experiences at face value. The problem is that this argument does not seem to be a priori, namely it seems to rely on a posteriori premises. First, how can we know a priori that perceptual experiences are complex phenomena? Second, contrary to what Peacocke claims, appealing to natural selection does seem to render premise (3) a posteriori. Peacocke claims that premise (3) 'does not have the truth of the wholly empirical biological theory of evolution by natural selection as one of its premises' (p. 96). But what matters is that it has the truth of at least part of the biological theory, enough for him to claim that perceptual states 'are produced by a device which has evolved by natural selection to represent the world accurately to the subject' (p. 87), and that is something that we could not come to know a priori. If this criticism is correct, this undermines Peacocke's rationalist project. However, it is not clear why Peacocke thinks that we must have an a priori explanation of all relations of entitlement. The only thing he seems to say to this effect is that any adequate philosophical theory

must be self-applicable. For instance we want our account of truth to be true. Similarly any fully general account of metaphysical necessity should be applicable to itself, if we are trying to provide an account of necessity which is not merely contingent. (p. 193)

And then he goes on to claim, by analogy, that 'Any theory of the a priori must therefore be applicable to itself, if it is to be acceptable' (p. 193). But what about a theory of perceptual error, does it have to be a perceptual error? Or a theory of fallacies, does it have to be fallacious? If this is the only motivation Peacocke has for claiming that

a theory of entitlement must be a priori, in particular a theory of a priori entitlement, then it is far from being well motivated.

It is also difficult to understand why Peacocke takes his Principle II to be clearly rationalistic. In fact, it has the flavour of empiricism. For a start, it states precisely what the empiricists want: we just need to appeal to linguistic understanding or grasp of concepts in order to explain the rationality of our a priori judgements and transitions. Principle II could even be seen as a criterion for the analytic. Peacocke does realize that this principle is consistent with traditional forms of empiricism, like logical positivism. So, why is such a principle rationalistic? Here is what Peacocke has to say:

Part of what distinguishes a rationalist position as I shall develop it is not merely its acknowledge of a priori principles, together with some link between that phenomenon on the one hand and concepts and understanding on the other. The present rationalism holds further that what it is for one of the principles to be true is not to be explained in conventionalist terms, but involves the application of a uniform notion of truth applicable to arbitrary concepts. [...] A rationalist holds too that these principles are knowable through the use of reason. (p. 53)

Peacocke seems to disregard new forms of empiricism, like the one advocated by Paul Boghossian, in which neither the a priori is explained through conventions nor does it vindicate a special kind of truth for the a priori. Of course, we could say that Boghossian is wrong in taking his theory to be a form of empiricism, but that is not the point. The point is, why assume that what is distinctive of empiricism is not the claim that we can explain the a priori with the analytic (taken as linguistic knowledge or conceptual knowledge) but the claim that a priori truths are of a different nature, namely that they are not about the world, as the logical positivists *also* claimed. The difference between rationalist and empiricist theories of the a priori is supposed to be an epistemological one. If the difference amounts to the nature of truth, it is metaphysical. But if the difference between rationalism and empiricism amounts to the source of the a priori entitlement as distinct from the source of the a posteriori entitlement, it is epistemological, as it should be. In several passages, Peacocke seems to agree with this. For instance, he explicitly says that the a priori is primarily about the way we access a certain proposition and only derivatively about the nature of certain propositions. And

this seems also explicit in the last sentence of the passage quoted above in which he appeals to the use of reason. But it is not clear what is that special role of reason beyond mere understanding, or grasp of concepts. In fact he explicitly claims on several passages that

Any form of rationalism merits the name only if it holds that there are a priori ways of coming to know contents, and that the status of these ways as a priori depends upon the grasp of the content in question (p. 152).

But exactly the same could be said of moderate forms of empiricism. After all, what he is claiming is that understanding meanings or grasp of contents is enough to explain the a priori, which is roughly what all analytic theories of the a priori have claimed. In fact, Peacocke goes to some pains to distinguish his rationalism, and strangely even Laurence Bonjour's, from any kind of rationalism that appeals to a special faculty of reason to explain the a priori. The difference between Peacocke's rationalism and empiricism boils down to what is special about the use of reason under his account. And the answer seems to be: Nothing. In fact, we are left with the uncomfortable felling that there is, after all, no realm of reason.

Peacocke claims that for a transition to be rational it must be 'rational from the thinker's own point of view' (p. 101). He claims that there are species of rationality; and what makes a thinker's rational from his own point of view is that he takes at face value those states which he is entitled to take at face value. For instance,

The rationality from the thinker's own point of view of a logical transition consists in his *appreciation in the right way* that the truth of the premises guarantee the truth of the conclusion, where the truth of the conclusion is conceived in accordance with the thinker's tacit knowledge of the contribution made to truth-conditions by its logical constituents (p. 178, my italics).

But what does 'appreciation in the right way' mean? He also talks about 'seeing' that a certain judgment is true as explaining the rationality of a judgement from the thinker's own point of view. But this talk of 'appreciation in the right way' or 'seeing' cannot do the explanatory work he aims. If what explains the rationality of my belief that either it will rain or not is because I can *see* that this is true, in what way is this different from the classical appeal to rational intuition that Peacocke explicitly repudiates?

It would be no surprise for those familiar with Peacocke's work to learn that this is a difficult and challenging book; it is difficult to follow, sometimes obscure, full of new technical jargon and difficult definitions. However, it should also be of no surprise to learn that this book is wonderfully insightful and full of new and valuable ideas that a review of this size could not do full justice. Overall, this is a major contribution to epistemology.

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Thought's Footing: Themes in Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, by Charles Travis. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 240 pp, £30.00.

Charles Travis é, entre outras coisas, um conhecido estudioso de Wittgenstein (cf., por exemplo, *The Uses of Sense* (Oxford, 1989) e *Unshadowed Thought* (Cambridge, MA, 2000)), e continua a tomar Wittgenstein como uma referência para a sua abordagem da natureza do pensamento e da linguagem e da relação destes com o mundo. No entanto, Travis cada vez mais se volta também para Frege, o que o faz neste livro procurar ver o Wittgenstein das *Investigações Filosóficas*, «à luz de Frege», i.e. como desenvolvendo posições fregeanas, respondendo a Frege, corrigindo algum ponto de Frege, etc. É este o princípio estruturador de *Thought's Footing*, e acerca dele lê-se na Introdução:

Ao longo desta investigação das *Investigações* segui um princípio metodológico central: se se quer compreender o que Wittgenstein está a querer fazer nalgum ponto das *Investigações*, deve-se sempre olhar para Frege – para a forma como aquilo que Wittgenstein diz pode ser uma reacção a algo que Frege diz (seja para modificar, ou rejeitar). Não avanço nenhuma outra justificação para o princípio a não ser os seus frutos. (p. 1)

O livro surgiu a partir de um conjunto de conferências proferidas por Travis no Collège de France em 2002, e é composto por uma Introdução e seis *Lectures*, com títulos elementares: *Mastery*, *Acquaintance*, *Hardness*, *Determination*, *Transcendence* e *Harmony*. Em termos práticos,