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## Nathan Ballantyne, KNOWING OUR LIMITS

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*Knowing Our Limits*, by Nathan Ballantyne. Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 326. \$39.95 (hardcover).

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Ballantyne's *Knowing Our Limits* is an impressive and important monograph on regulative epistemology. He notes that for the past 50 years, analytic epistemology has been largely descriptive rather than regulative. Descriptive epistemology theorizes about the nature and scope of knowledge and reasonable belief, addressing questions such as: which illuminating conditions are necessary and sufficient for knowledge or justified belief? what is the extent of our knowledge about the external world via perception or about the realm of necessary truths via a priori intuition? Critics (such as Stephen Stich, Susan Haack, Michael Bishop, and J.D. Trout) bemoan the fact that so little of what goes on in descriptive epistemology seems to be useful in other subfields within philosophy or in human inquiry more generally. Regulative epistemology aims to deal with this concern by providing guidance for inquiry—usable guidance for all areas of our investigative lives. (The analogue for regulative epistemology in the moral realm is applied or practical ethics, with descriptive epistemology corresponding to the combination of normative ethics and metaethics.)

This eleven-chapter book is divided into three parts. The first three chapters describe and defend regulative epistemology. Chapters 4–9 introduce and lay out a metacognitive method for helping us to know our limits as believers. The method is to be used for discovering “whether our controversial beliefs are epistemically unreasonable” (90) and, when they are, for moving us away from overly confident belief on these topics toward a “doubtful or unsettled mindset” (89) that Ballantyne calls “doxastic openness” (112–115). The final two chapters take up important objections to the method proposed in the previous six chapters. After briefly commenting on a few of the book's virtues, I will summarize its content and then raise a few concerns.

The book is well-written, both stylistically and philosophically. It certainly passes the “fun to read” test, which is rare for a philosophy book. It



is interspersed with humor and it is loaded with literary allusions as well as fascinating examples from history and science. The virtues of clarity, tight argumentation, and accessible and persuasive prose are on display throughout. In addition, although the book is innovative and exciting insofar as it pursues the less traveled road of regulative epistemology, Ballantyne doesn't give in to the temptation to dismiss descriptive epistemology as a useless enterprise, as "radical" regulative epistemologists tend to do (298–299). Instead, he develops an "inclusive regulative epistemology," which affirms the importance of descriptive epistemology as a valuable philosophical endeavor to be pursued alongside regulative epistemology (18–19). This, I think, is wise. The suggestion that we should ignore descriptive epistemology in favor of regulative epistemology (or, for that matter, normative ethics and metaethics in favor of practical ethics) is about as plausible as saying that we should ignore the foundational sciences and focus solely on the applications of science that we find in engineering and technology. Even if descriptive epistemology, normative ethics, metaethics, physics, chemistry, and biology aren't *obviously* useful outside the academy in the way regulative epistemology, practical ethics, engineering, and technology are, the former are still arguably *in fact* beneficial to society as a whole.

Turning to the book's content, the first three chapters (as already noted) present and defend regulative epistemology. The introductory first chapter gives an account of how Anglo-American epistemology came to be non-regulative and explains some of the problems with descriptive epistemology. One of the upshots of the first chapter is that pressures toward specialization in the academy have contributed to the narrowing of epistemology to descriptive epistemology and that successful regulative epistemology will need to be a more interdisciplinary affair.

Chapter 2 ("Regulative Epistemology in the Seventeenth Century") takes us back to a time before advanced specialization when "interdisciplinary" research was the norm. It also takes us back to a time of crisis, when the "broad consensus of the Middle Ages" gave way to "religious, political, and scientific upheavals" (31). As a way to find something stable in an age of seemingly unprecedented instability, thinkers in the early modern era engaged in regulative epistemology, seeking guiding principles and practices that would reduce errors in an obviously error-ridden world. Ballantyne uses Descartes, Arnauld, Nicole, Bacon, Boyle, Locke, and others as inspiring models and guides for the contemporary re-invention of regulative epistemology. The thought is that we too live in an age of crisis and we could use the help this historical excursion brings.

The third chapter ("How Do Epistemic Principles Guide?") gets practical. It notes that providing guidance is only half the battle. If no one takes advantage of the proffered guidance, the results of regulative epistemology are no more practically valuable than descriptive epistemology. What is needed isn't just good advice but good advice that is likely to be used. Ballantyne looks to the sciences, including the social sciences,

for guidance in learning how human practice (including the practice of inquiry) can be changed effectively for the better. Such change requires us all to work against the hypocrisy and *akrasia* of human nature. Ballantyne isn't entirely optimistic that we will succeed. But he draws upon the social sciences to outline pathways forward, which he hopes further research will fill out in more helpful detail.

The next six chapters lay out Ballantyne's proposed method for regulating our beliefs on controversial topics. As he points out in Chapter 4 ("How to Know Our Limits"), the method draws our attention to higher-order evidence about our competence as inquirers, what he calls "competence evidence," which often raises doubts about whether we are well-positioned to form justified beliefs about controversial matters on the basis of our first-order evidence. These doubts are what he calls "competence defeaters" (106–107). The method consists of (i) *principles* saying that we have reason to be doubtful of a controversial claim in particular contingent circumstances (90) and (ii) *observations* highlighting features of situations we commonly experience that provide us with evidence relevant to our competence as inquirers and map onto the contingent circumstances mentioned in the principles (118). Together, these principles and observations can be used to identify *prima facie* competence defeaters; if they remain undefeated, the affected controversial beliefs are unreasonable. Whether these defeaters are undefeated in a particular case will depend on what the person's total evidence is. In the end, Ballantyne doesn't assume (as he confesses that he initially did) that skepticism about controversial questions will be the result of applying his method (109–111). It's because Ballantyne doesn't know the minds of others or, for that reason, what their total evidence is, that he "must write doubtfully of skepticism" (111). However, in cases where the competence defeaters remain undefeated by one's total evidence, the rational response will often be a state of *doxastic openness* toward a controversial proposition, which involves significant doubt about which of belief, disbelief, or suspension of judgment is the reasonable attitude to take toward that proposition given our total evidence.

Chapters 5–9 focus on five different kinds of competence evidence, highlighting a variety of reasons for doubting our competence on controversial topics. In each case, Ballantyne identifies features of what are, for all of us, realistic circumstances in which we often find ourselves (features that are relevant to our competence as inquirers on controversial topics) and he presents plausible principles indicating that these features of our circumstances provide us with *prima facie* defeaters for our controversial beliefs. In summarizing these five chapters, I will be brief, but that shouldn't obscure the fact that they are, in some ways, the key chapters of the book—the place where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. They are also, in every case, extremely and often surprisingly convincing.

Chapter 5 ("Disagreement and Debunking") notes that when an apparent epistemic peer—i.e., "someone roughly equally informed and

competent to answer some question" (121)—disagrees with us, we have *prima facie* reason to question our own reliability. However, if we have reason to view this apparent peer as problematically biased (and for thinking that we are not), this can prevent their dissent from giving us a competence defeater. Ballantyne argues that, unfortunately, we all have excellent reasons for thinking that we are not very good at accurately detecting bias in others or ourselves. He concludes that it is not an easy matter rationally to avoid competence defeaters that arise via recognized disagreement on controversial topics.

Chapters 6 and 7 ("Counterfactual Interlocutors" and "Unpossessed Evidence") focus on the fact that our limited perspective on potential objections to our views should make us doubtful of our competence on controversial topics. For one thing, the likelihood that our defenses of our controversial views would survive (even to our own satisfaction) the scrutiny of the world's best philosophers, past or present—if they were incentivized to look carefully at our work with the aim of discovering its flaws—is slim to none. For another, the literature on most topics of interest in controversial fields is immense and ever-growing. The chances that we have adequately evaluated and countered all the relevant challenges to our own controversial opinions are small indeed.

Chapters 8 and 9 ("Epistemic Trespassing" and "Novices and Expert Disagreement") focus on the fact that our limitations prevent us from being experts in all of the fields on which we rely (sometimes unwittingly) or should rely for at least part of our evidence for our controversial beliefs. On the one hand, some of the topics on which we form controversial beliefs (e.g., human freedom, morality, religion, economics, and politics) require answers to what Ballantyne calls "hybridized questions" because they are "addressed and answered by combining evidence and techniques from two or more fields," some of which are outside our areas of expertise (200). On the other hand, relying on testimony from experts is complicated by the fact that we are often unable adequately to determine which experts in a field are the reliable ones in cases where experts disagree. In each case, our inability to have expertise in all the fields with information relevant to the controversial topics on which we are inclined to form beliefs often results in our having at least *prima facie* competence defeaters for these beliefs.

Ballantyne closes the book by considering two important objections to his method. In Chapter 10, he considers the self-defeat objection, which says that because the reliability of the method is itself controversial, it will lead us to be doubtful about the reliability of the method. Ballantyne offers multiple replies, some of which are modeled after replies given by conciliationists in the disagreement literature who are responding to similar self-defeat objections to their view. He also pushes back with challenging questions such as: is the method really controversial? is the proposed defeater undefeated? even if the method has reliability problems, isn't it still better than any known alternative method?

In Chapter 11, he addresses the “why bother?” objection. If, in virtue of knowing our limits in the ways highlighted in Chapters 5–9, it becomes reasonable to be in a state of doxastic openness towards most or all of the controversial propositions about which we’re curious, why bother investigating them? Ballantyne gives two answers. First, using the method can contribute to superpersonal inquiry, in which multiple inquirers over many generations can, as a group (in ways we often cannot guess or imagine), arrive at reasonable answers to questions that we can’t answer ourselves in our lifetimes. Second, following the method can make me the kind of person I want to be: tolerant of intellectual conflict, willing to confront my ignorance, appropriately independent of others in my deliberations, and filled with wonder (284–297). The good sense, humility, and consistency-with-the-method that are on display in Ballantyne’s response to objections in the final two chapters serve to illustrate the method’s strengths and make a compelling case, by example, in support of it.

Let me turn now to some concerns about the book and the larger project of which it is a part. The first has to do with who is qualified to do regulative epistemology (Ballantyne’s suggestion seems to be that epistemologists in general are). On the one hand, I applaud Ballantyne’s own excellent efforts to offer advice on belief-formation (what he calls “guidance for inquiry”), especially when so few epistemologists do this and far fewer do it as well as he does. I have no objections to his doing this work or to his encouraging other epistemologists to join him in it. On the other hand, I wonder if this is a task for which epistemologists *qua* epistemologists or even academics *qua* academics are, in all cases, particularly qualified. Ballantyne certainly thinks that regulative epistemology is an interdisciplinary affair: philosophers have their strengths when it comes to advising others on how to improve their belief-formation, but social scientists have their own different strengths for the inquiry-guidance project that can complement those of philosophers. What concerns me, however, is that, in addition to input from these sorts of experts, a crucially important source for acquiring good advice on belief-formation will be from those who believe excellently on a given topic. And just as moral philosophers or social scientists investigating moral character or moral behavior aren’t always those who *behave* in the morally best ways (or accurately identify those who do), so also epistemologists and social scientists investigating belief improvements don’t always *form beliefs* in the best ways or even know how to form beliefs in the best ways (at least not on all topics).

Who does believe in the best ways on a given topic? (And what counts as believing in the best way?) Perhaps highly successful scientists and mathematicians are those who believe in the best ways when it comes to the subject matters of their disciplines. Maybe we can look to academics for guidance on what counts as the best way to form beliefs on those topics. On other topics, we know how to measure better and worse in widely agreed on ways (e.g., to evaluate beliefs based on distance vision we can move closer and test which beliefs are best using close-up vision). But

what about when it comes to believing excellently on matters of morality, religion, or politics? In these cases, there is a lot of controversy about which beliefs are the best ones to have, about which are the best ways to go about acquiring such beliefs, and even about what sort of virtues we should have in mind when asking about the “best” beliefs and the “best” ways to form them. Can expertise in philosophy or science authoritatively settle these controversies? That seems doubtful. But if it can’t, how helpful can advice given by professional philosophers or scientists be on how to improve belief-formation on these topics? (This isn’t to say that such expertise can’t be helpful in identifying certain general features of better and worse belief-formation, although great care needs to be taken not to overgeneralize by taking good-making features of belief-formation in one area or context to be requirements for goodness in belief-formation in every area or context.)

A second concern has to do with Ballantyne’s suggestion that the recent epistemological work of analytic philosophers almost never counts as regulative epistemology. In fact, I think that some of the recent work in moral epistemology, religious epistemology, and philosophical methodology counts as regulative epistemology, although the results are controversial and not as detailed or explicit as one might like. For example, in disputes about whether reliance on moral intuition should be eschewed or welcomed, in debates about whether religious belief can be properly basic, and in discussions about whether philosophical belief-formation does or should depend on intuition, guidance for inquiry is regularly being offered. Some offer advice such as: never rely on moral intuition, never form religious beliefs apart from arguments, don’t rely on intuition in doing philosophy. Others offer contrary advice: don’t conclude that there is no evidential value to moral intuition, philosophical intuition, or mundane religious experience. We might wish that these disputes could be settled in definitive ways (which brings to mind the difficulties noted in the previous paragraph). But we can’t deny that advice of these kinds is intended as guidance for inquiry and, therefore, as regulative epistemology.

The last concern I’ll mention isn’t so much a concern with Ballantyne’s book as a concern about the incredible challenge faced by regulative epistemologists. In fact, it’s a concern of Ballantyne’s (64) that I alluded to above. There are at least three tasks for regulative epistemologists. The first is getting clear on what are the best ways to form beliefs. The second is determining how best to advise people to go about improving the ways they form beliefs so that they are more in accord with the best ways to form beliefs. The third is getting people, including the advisors themselves, to follow this advice. Unfortunately, hypocrisy, *akrasia*, and laziness are powerful factors in human behavior that keep both would-be regulative epistemologists and those they advise from following this advice. Because this review is for the journal of the Society of *Christian* Philosophers, it is perhaps worth noting that Christian teaching provides grounds for both

pessimism and optimism on this matter. The doctrines of original sin and total depravity don't encourage a rosy outlook among those hoping that their proposed guidance for inquiry will result in actual improvements on a large scale. But the doctrines of divine grace and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are more encouraging on this score. In any case, despite this concern (and with or without Christian teaching), it seems wise and valuable for epistemologists and others to try to do what we can to improve human inquiry (including our own) even if the prospects of widespread success often seem dim. In my view, Ballantyne has not only tried hard to do this, he has (in *Knowing Our Limits*) succeeded at providing us with usable advice that will improve our inquiry if only we can discipline (or otherwise arrange for) ourselves to follow it.

*The Lost Sheep in Philosophy of Religion: New Perspectives on Disability, Gender, Race, and Animals*, edited by Blake Hereth and Kevin Timpe. Routledge, 2020. Pp. xiii + 400. \$155.00 (hardcover), \$28.98 (e-book).

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*The Lost Sheep in Philosophy of Religion* is a timely and significant contribution to contemporary philosophy of religion. It is the product of a concerted effort to include more voices and perspectives and to expand the range of topics addressed by philosophers of religion, especially by those who practice it in Anglophone and thus primarily "analytic" departments of philosophy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this volume includes a significant number of contributions by up-and-coming, early career philosophers, and hence, it also provides us with an exciting glimpse of the future of the philosophy of religion.

The volume consists of an introduction by the editors, followed by essays broken into five Sections. In the introduction, the editors helpfully survey analytic philosophy of religion as it is currently practiced as well as the main criticisms that have been launched against it both from within and from the outside. Section I is entitled "Methodology" and it consists of two pieces. The first is a fascinating summary and analysis of two focus group discussions organized and directed by Helen De Cruz (chapter 1), where she attempts to get a clearer picture of what it is like to be a member of an underrepresented group who is currently working in philosophy of religion. In the second contribution (chapter 2), Michelle Panchuk argues that philosophy of religion should dispense with the pretense that the

