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Book Review

Considered Judgment, by Catherin Z. Elgin. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, ã1996, x + 227pp., index. Paper, $19.95/£12.50, Cloth, $47.50/£30.00

Katherine Elgin's *Considered Judgment* argues for a reconception of the epistemological project. In particular, Elgin seeks to convince the reader that epistemology should rid itself of (1) the idea that the goal in inquiry is certainty and that a system of "knowledge" is valuable only if it is certain and (2) the idea that emotions, metaphors, exemplifications, and fictions have no place in our understanding of reality because they are not literal truths. In its place Elgin argues for reflective equilibrium as the standard for rational acceptability. A rationally acceptable system may not only include literal, factual beliefs, but also metaphors, useful fictions, and emotional responses. Furthermore, a rationally acceptable system is revisable, but "neither absolute nor arbitrary" (ix). This way of putting the matter oversimplifies things somewhat, since in rejecting (1) and (2) a number of other 'traditional' ideas must be rejected as well, for instance, that knowledge is the sort of thing that can always be articulated or that knowledge is primarily something possessed by individual subjects rather than communities of inquirers.

This is a dense and ambitious book since in a little over 200 pages Elgin seeks a complete reconception of the epistemological task. What I will do here is highlight the main elements of Elgin's reflective equilibrium model of rational acceptability. Elgin divides epistemological theories into types of procedures. A **perfect procedure** recognizes an independent criterion for a correct outcome and a method the results of which are *guaranteed* to satisfy the criterion. An **imperfect procedure** recognizes an independent criterion for a correct outcome but has no method the results of which are guaranteed to satisfy the criterion. A **pure procedure** recognizes no independent criterion for a correct outcome. Elgin's project is to defend and work out the implications of a version of imperfect procedural epistemology.

Foundationalism is a perfect procedure. Foundationalism recognizes an independent criterion for a correct outcome –whether the resultant beliefs are true – and seeks to provide an infallible method for generating true beliefs. Descartes' *Meditations* is foundational in this sense since Descartes seeks to provide a criterion (clarity and distinctness) by which one can be certain that one's beliefs are as a matter of fact true. Elgin's first task is to reject perfect procedural epistemology by way of rejecting foundationalism. I have to admit I am a bit puzzled by the general strategy here. Elgin clearly wishes to reject the idea that we can provide an infallible method for generating results to conform to an independent criterion (that is, a criterion that is not itself part of the method). But the arguments in the chapter on foundationalism seem aimed primarily at the notion of a basic belief that is essential to foundationalism. A basic belief is one that is justified without relying for its

justification on other beliefs. But as Elgin points out, this means that basic beliefs must be logically independent of other beliefs, meaning that their content cannot be explained by appeal to other beliefs. This is because any logical connection between a basic belief and some other belief will ultimately make the justification of the basic belief dependent on that other belief. Consider, for instance, the proposition:

(P) *I seem to see red here now.*

P is the sort of proposition that is often taken to be basic in the required sense. But the problem is that it is incompatible with

(Q) *I seem to see blue here now.*

So it turns out that *P* is dependent for its justification on ~*Q*. The only way to avoid this dependency is to sever all the logical ties between basic beliefs and other propositions. But once those logical ties have been cut, it is difficult to see how a person could have basic beliefs, since their content would be cognitively inaccessible to the subject. This is not the only argument Elgin gives against foundationalism; she further argues that it presupposes several false dichotomies, for instance, the dichotomy between scheme and content. But it was unclear what exactly the relationship between foundationalism and perfect proceduralism consists in. I can see how foundationalism is an example of perfect proceduralism. But it is unclear how the rejection of foundationalism by itself means the rejection of the idea that the goal of epistemology is to provide an infallible criterion for epistemic success. It seems that there might be ways of hashing out the idea of perfect proceduralism without needing foundationalism or basic beliefs. At any rate, Elgin rejects foundationalism, claiming that

> A desire to preclude error without relying on luck underwrites foundationalism's methods, goals, and standards. That aspiration seems destined to be unfulfilled. So the aim of epistemology must be reconceived. Such a reconception is welcome in any case. For the boundary foundationalism drew was too restrictive. By making the avoidance of error our sole or primary epistemic objective, it overlooked the importance we attach to sensitivity, relevance, informativeness, and cognitive efficacy. We regularly risk error to achieve such ends. An acceptable epistemology should explain how, when, and why it is reasonable to do so. (59)

So I am uncertain how these sorts of flaws in foundationalism imply that the whole project of perfect procedural epistemology is untenable.

However, if perfect procedural epistemology is too restrictive, then pure procedural epistemology (hereafter *proceduralism*) is too lenient, though it seems clear that Elgin's sympathies lie in its direction. Proceduralism conceives inquiry as a game, epistemology as the description of the rules of that game. Games have several attributes that are important for our purposes. First, they are rule governed. Second, the rules define the goal of the game, the criteria by which the goal is to be judged to have been reached, and the acceptable means by which to achieve it. Third, the rules of the game cannot be criticized, so long as the rules are such that it is possible for someone to win. It is not as if those who invented Chess could have gotten the rules wrong somehow, or that there are 'better' rules that Chess might have followed. For any change in the rules (at least in the basic

rules) would result in a different game. To say that Chess should have been different is only to say that one wishes to play some game besides Chess. The rules of a game are **conventional** and need no justification other than the agreement of the participants. Fourth, if the rules of a game are properly followed, then it cannot be the case that the person determined by the rules to be the winner is not the winner. Games are procedures such that their results are not certified by any standard outside the rules of the game itself.

According to proceduralism, the rules of inquiry are conventional in the same way that any game is conventional. The epistemic community decides what truth and knowledge is, what the criteria are for something's counting as knowledge, and how knowledge is obtained. Concepts such as justification, evidence, relevance, etc., are given meaning in the use to which inquirers put them. Knowing the meaning of the word 'justified' (for instance) just is being able to use the word competently, where this means, roughly, 'in the way that other members of the community of inquirers recognize as legitimate'. And when an investigation conforms to the norms settled upon by the epistemic community, the results of that investigation are decisive. If the community says that the result counts as knowledge, it does; and if the community says it does not, then it is not. There is no court of appeal beyond the dictates of the agreed upon method against which to determine whether the resultant theory counts as knowledge. Elgin points out that as a matter of fact, particular inquiries stop when a model of the phenomenon in question is accepted on all (or at least mostly all) hands. Scientists do not wait for proof of correspondence (whatever that would mean) before calling the puzzle solved and moving on.

There are two implications of the proceduralist's stance. First, epistemology must be descriptive rather than normative. All the epistemologist can do is describe the standards of inquiry that we actually accept.

> …the language game is constituted by the rules that govern it. So the critic cannot say that it would be better if the move [the gambler's fallacy] were forbidden. For it would not be the game that it is if the rules were revised. We cannot then correct a given practice by changing the rules, for such changes create new practices. And we cannot intelligibly recommend correcting the rules that constitute a practice, for in such recommendations language is on a holiday; the applications of its terms are removed from the networks of norms and objectives that render their workaday uses and references determinate. (95)

The recommendation that inquirers ought to accept the new standard of justification (for instance) is either useless (if they already accept it) or false (if they don't). Proceduralism does not allow for the possibility of revising or criticizing the practice. It's uncertain whether Elgin intends this to be a criticism of proceduralism. As far as I can tell, she never explicitly says that it is, but I suspect it has to be since she has already stated that our goal should be to explain what makes it reasonable to accept the standards we do accept. But when she summarizes her criticism of proceduralism at the end of the section, it goes unmentioned.

Second, if proceduralism is correct, then the results of any particular experiment, so long as the experiment conforms to the agreed norms, are unassailable. But this is not how science in fact proceeds:

> We consider established findings open to corroboration and encourage the development of

> new sources of support for already accepted claims. The discovery of gravitational lenses, for example, was taken to confirm the discovery of relativity, even though that theory already satisfied our standards of acceptability. If those standards were authoritative, such discoveries would lack corroborative power. They would also lack the capacity to unsettle accepted findings. A negative X-ray could not undermine a diagnosis of tuberculosis if medical science treated a positive skin test as conclusive. But the X-ray would likely give us pause, even if it did not immediately refute received wisdom. Our cognitive practices thus apparently differ from games in permitting newly discovered facts, newly developed tests, newly formulated desiderata to reinforce or discredit currently accepted findings and the standards that justified their acceptance. (97)

Settled convictions can be overturned, and they can be corroborated. Neither of these would be possible if a scientific experiment were analogous to a game of chess. Proceduralism is therefore inconsistent. It claims on the one hand that the epistemologist should describe our cognitive practices. But then it holds, contrary to those practices, that epistemology is a game. Here is one of the places Elgin's discussion is confusing. It is difficult to tell if she's rejecting proceduralism because (1) it fails to describe our actual cognitive practices, or (2) because it makes normative epistemology impossible and invites radical relativism, or (3) both.

At any rate, Elgin goes on to say:

> There is a third alternative [to perfect procedural epistemology and pure procedural epistemology]: to construct our epistemic ends out of our actual interests and goals in theorizing. To be sure, we cannot identify the objectives we happen to pursue with the legitimate ends of inquiry. That would be to confuse the valued with the valuable. Moreover, our actual epistemic goals form a disconcertingly motley crew. They are apt to be inchoate, incomplete, mutually incompatible, and/or jointly unsatisfiable. Still, by adjudicating among them, revising and amending as required, we may bring them into reflective equilibrium. And a system of tenable commitments in reflective equilibrium defines, I suggest, a worthy epistemic goal. Its elements are reasonable in light of one another, and the system as a whole is reasonable in light of the objectives we originally espoused. (99)

This is another place where it is unclear how to understand what Elgin is saying. I was under the general impression that Elgin's goal was to explain (1) what our cognitive practices actually are (hence the rejection of proceduralism) and (2) why they are reasonable. But here Elgin seems to be suggesting that the job of the epistemologist is to *construct* a system in reflective equilibrium from the raw materials of actual cognitive practice. So I can't tell whether Elgin means to endorse common practice or to use it as a basis for her own epistemological theory. That is, I can't tell whether Elgin thinks that epistemology is essentially descriptive, as the proceduralist would have it, or normative, as the perfect proceduralist would have it. Perhaps Elgin's view is that our current practices are reasonable in light of our epistemic goals and that her project is to explain how they are reasonable.

Elgin says that once our disparate epistemic goals are brought into equilibrium, epistemic norms can be assessed in terms of their contribution to achieving those goals. Specific theories can then be assessed in terms of their having satisfied the norms in question. Putting the matter this way is misleading, however, because it makes it sound as if there is a hierarchical relationship between

epistemic goals, norms, and theories. But according to Elgin, the relationship between these elements of our epistemic practice is one of *mutual* support. This is, I take it, what Elgin means when she says that a system is in reflective equilibrium.

But reflective equilibrium is not sufficient for justification. Acceptance of new ideas is in very large part contingent upon their having a felicitous relationship with already accepted beliefs.

> Coherence is not enough. A system is coherent if its constituents are suitably related to one another. Then its statements, strategies, values, and priorities form a mutually supporting network, each being reasonable in light of the others and each contributing to the integrity of the whole. Plainly such a system could be a complete fiction. Aside from the support its constituents lend to one another, there may be little reason to endorse any one of them. And their mutual support may derive from a judicious disregard for contravening considerations. For reflective equilibrium, independently motivated, initially tenable commitments must underwrite coherence. The components of a system in reflective equilibrium must be reasonable in light of one another, and the system as a whole reasonable in light of our initially tenable commitments. Indeed, such a system must maximize tenability. For we would not on reflection accept a system of though it a competitor were more tenable. …systems in reflective equilibrium are tethered – not to Things in themselves but to our antecedent understanding of and interest in the matter at hand. (107)

Initially tenable commitments are the goals, standards, and theories that are already accepted when a particular inquiry begins. For Elgin, inquiry always starts 'in the middle', against the background of these commitments. This is not to say that these initially tenable commitments are not revisable. But there is, on Elgin's view, a strong presumption in their favor, based on their longstanding presence in the system.

Thus Elgin avoids the radical relativism that results from proceduralism without falling back into a perfect proceduralist model. Elgin is sanguine about the weaker relativism that results from a reflective equilibrium model of rational acceptance, saying that the admission that there might be other systems as valuable as one's own doesn't mean that one's own cannot be said to be valuable. But the claim that systems in reflective equilibrium are grounded in initially tenable beliefs does limit the relativism that results. Though there are a number of possible coherent systems, the number of such systems that would be tenable in light of initially tenable commitments would be much smaller. Although her view admits of relativism, not just any coherent system will do.

The final chapters of the book are devoted to arguing for an expanded conception of the epistemological enterprise. According to Elgin, emotions, metaphors, fictions, and exemplifications all play an important role in understanding, whereas on the traditional conception of knowledge they are excluded either because they are irrational (as in the case of emotions), or because they do not purport to be and are not literally true. Having rejected the idea that the goal of epistemology is to provide methods for guaranteeing the truth of our beliefs, Elgin is now free to incorporate emotions, etc., into the reflective equilibrium model. For they were excluded by perfect proceduralism in the first place because they were thought to play no role in guaranteeing the truth of one's beliefs.

Elgin says that the system that results from scientific practice is better thought of as understanding rather than knowledge, for a number of reasons. First, knowledge is understood as permanent and

not subject to revision, whereas any belief under the system just described is theoretically revisable. Second, knowledge is usually thought to be restricted to judgments, but "justification within our procedure is of a piece. Values, rules, categories, and methods are justified along with and in the same ways as judgments" (122). That is, the rules, standards, and methods are themselves part of the theory, on Elgin's view. Third, knowledge implies truth, but tenability does not.

Readers already sympathetic to Elgin's general view will like it better than those who want to be convinced. It's not that the arguments are not good. The arguments against foundationalism are powerful and Elgin is an astute observer and provides numerous interesting and helpful examples in developing the reflective equilibrium model. But she does not spend a lot of time considering objections to her view, and given the scope of the project, there are bound to be many. So if one is the kind of philosopher who likes books that put one in the teeth of a raging controversy, this book may be a bit of a disappointment even though Elgin's claims are controversial. Still it's a refreshing and fascinating work and one cannot help but be impressed with the breadth of Elgin's examples and the subtlety of her analysis (especially in regards to the role of emotions and metaphor).

I have to admit, though, that at times I found the discussion a bit obscure. There were times when I was unsure whether Elgin was arguing for a particular view or only explicating it or both, especially with regards to her discussion of proceduralism.

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