

Book Reviews/ Comptes rendus

Knowledge and Civilization

BARRY ALLEN

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"Philosophy begins in the shadow of the artisan." With this terse and somewhat enigmatic statement Barry Allen begins the Introduction to this fascinating book. Its meaning becomes clear as the several main themes of the book come into view. The penchant of early Greek philosophers for abstraction and rational theorizing led to the disparagement in philosophical circles of the inherited wisdom and practical talents of the day, and the new theories of knowledge and reality which became the model for philosophizing in the West did not rate highly the knowledge found in centuries of intelligent tool making, art, manufacture, and social construction. One of Allen's central theses is that any adequate philosophy of knowledge must accommodate the superlative artifactual performances of humanity evident throughout the history of *Homo sapiens*. Western philosophy with its sophisticated analyses of methods of inquiry and argumentative discourse has been, of course, genuinely enlightening and progressive, but at the same time it has been too narrowly focused to see the merits of nonlinguistic forms of cultivated capacities for making and creating. Allen sees his project as "the rehabilitation of philosophy from the rationalist bias of its origin, ... a new direction in the theory of knowledge, away from textbook problems of epistemology, towards an ecological philosophy of technology and civilization" (3).

The second bold thrust of this book is to argue that conceiving of knowledge in the broader way suggested above is made urgent by new understandings of human evolution and the development of mind. Allen makes use of the growing literature in this area which manifests two prominent tendencies: the first, to understand knowledge as a determined, adaptive accommodation among human beings; and the second, to perceive knowledge as a consequence of evolution, certainly, but as emerging from an area of contingency, aesthetic preference, and choice on the part of human beings. He allies himself with the latter group, having in mind the gap of some fifty thousand years between the evolution of an organism capable of the kind of cognition that human beings have and the actual cultivation and use of these possibilities in human culture and (eventually) civilization.

The focus on the broad sweep of evolution is also the context of Allen's third main preoccupation—namely, the mutual dependence and synergistic interaction between knowledge production and civilization. He claims that though human knowledge developed, perhaps discontinuously, over a stretch of thousands of years, it passed through an "architectural threshold" late in this span owing to the emergence of cities and the qualitatively new density of artifactual mediation that cities brought into being. Not only did cities provide safety and generate tolerance, but further, "[t]he mutualism of civilities and personal conduct, sentiment and taste, and civilized practices of law, morality, and art, make cities at once architectural and ethical accomplishments" (218). Allen contends that in the twenty-first century the forms of knowledge that sustain humanity are mutually dependent on the flourishing of cities (and their urban reach) which are "the abiding matrix of civilized practice, and consequently of civilization"

(218). The mutual dependence of urban centers and knowledge, he suggests, is so necessary, and at the same time so fragile, that the fate of humanity now depends on the assiduous cultivation of those forms of knowledge that will enable human beings to flourish in the global urban network.

Two thirds of Allen's book is devoted to the presentation of his radical redescription of knowledge. A systematic exposition is given in Part One, which includes a clear portrait of what epistemology has been in the Western tradition together with a concise and lucid sketch of his own theory that knowledge is better thought of as the capacity for superlative artifactual performances. In Part Two, this new conception of knowledge is situated within postmodern literature, with whole chapters devoted to Nietzsche, Foucault, and Rorty, though along the way substantial reference is made also to Dewey, Heidegger, Quine, and many, many others. Rorty makes a special point, in his Preface to the book, of remarking on the richness of the author's frame of reference in defending his radical departures.

Part Three, the last third of the book, is devoted to spelling out how the search for knowledge should be understood as a contingent choice in the context of human evolution, and to the further task of explaining the close interconnection between the ways in which knowledge has been pursued and the thriving or otherwise of civilizations. Allen concludes with some urgent and somber thoughts (informed by an almost Heideggerian pathos) on the human predicament at this time, e.g., with regard to the undesirable consequences of technologically transformed agriculture, and the failure, in Allen's view, of most efforts of city planning. These and other particular concerns of the author, briefly touched upon, are huge global problems which do indeed illustrate his point about the sometimes shortsighted and counterproductive applications of scientific knowledge, but they are dealt with too cursorily to assure confident agreement of all readers.

The book is well structured, and the reader's progress is facilitated in a number of ways. Each chapter begins with a paragraph explaining its place in the whole and the focus and aim of that chapter. The argument throughout is punctuated by sketches of trends in philosophy and by summaries of parts of the author's position which are masterpieces of concision and clarity.

The novelty of Allen's critique of Western epistemology is found in his claim that most of his allies in this critique are implicated in the tradition they so vociferously criticize. This is so by reason of their almost exclusive preoccupation with language and discourse. He sees them as fixated on language and unable to get beyond it. To mention one instance, he shares Foucault's idea that knowledge and social power are "inextricable, continuous, facets of each other," but he notes that Foucault "does not distinguish ... between knowledge and sanctioned, accepted, prestigious statements" (122). Foucault, he believes, is stuck in the order of discourse, which is very limiting because "[t]here is more to *Homo sapiens* than *logos*, more to knowledge than words, more to its value than the truth of an irrefutable discourse.... Two million years of technical culture have so interbred humans and artifacts that our organism is now untenable without their shelter" (145).

Allen recommends a shift of emphasis from language (and "the relentless linguistifying" of philosophy in the recent past) to artifactual performance as central to the grasp of knowledge. Knowledge has no essence. It must be understood in terms of its good which is found in successful actions, useful manufacture or, to use a summary term, artifactual performances—not mundane, habitual performances but creative, superlative performances, a notion that links knowledge to art. "Art and knowledge alike are rooted in *aesthesis*: prelogical preferences, prelinguistic sensitivity to felt differences; an aesthetic comprehension of performative possibilities conditioned by the ontogenetic interaction of neurology and artifactual ecology" (69). He suggests that these performances are assessed with regard to such dimensions as appropriateness to use, quality of design, fecundity, and symbiosis (72–3).

By way of illustrating his radical departure from traditional epistemology, he reminds us that "the Inuit of Baffin Island do not 'believe that snow is white,' they know it—not as an impeccably justified belief, not as an 'attitude' to a 'proposition,' but as kinesthetic, adaptive, performative, ecological knowledge, expressed in artifacts, practices, language, and myth" (18). The importance of linguistic expressions of knowledge and the significance of truth are not being denied here, of course (how could they, when Allen's book is a linguistic artifact, indeed, a superlative artifactual performance replete with truth claims which have to stand up to critical examination). However, the author consciously decenters language and truth to make room for a broader characterization of knowledge: "Knowledge is deeper than language, different from belief, more valuable than truth. It is exemplified in exemplary performances with artifacts of all kinds. It is itself an artifact of artifacts interacting in an artifactual ecology" (59). Allen's artifactual constructivism, if I may put it that way, goes all the way down, and while he complains about some philosophers being stuck in the order of discourse (he exempts Dewey, Heidegger, and perhaps Nietzsche), he seems quite comfortable himself in the more ample but still circumscribed order of artifacts. For there are no known nonartifacts, according to Allen, nor do we have any reason to postulate their existence. "'Reality,' in the only sense that matters, is completely artifactual" (62). Or again, "'reality' means the environment of whatever life poses the question of its meaning" (85). Thus he eliminates the dichotomy between artifacts and the natural order and challenges a response from those whose intuitive predilections on these matters are of a realist sort.

Allen's philosophy of knowledge is iconoclastic, but it is intelligible with reference to lines of argument commonly pursued in the profession. His philosophy of civilization, however, presents a different kind of problem since there is much less of a common frame of reference within which to work. In 1932, Albert Schweitzer lamented the lack of interest in philosophy of civilization and he published a three-volume work on the subject. In the years that followed, a few excursions were made in that direction such as R. G. Collingwood's *The New Leviathan* (1942) which was inspired by the rise of fascism and Nazism, but no subdiscipline developed to make progress with these issues. The term "civilization" is used variously, and often without a very determinate meaning, but in the context of particular conversations it is clear enough, and few think it is useful to theorize about the concept. Some uses of the word are compromised by ideological self-

interest, which makes the topic unattractive if not incendiary. But at the same time, there are many more or less isolated works on civilization written by archaeologists, historians, sociologists, and political scientists who are also strategic analysts. They tend to be individual, even idiosyncratic, efforts, but some attract a very broad general readership because they are perceived to be about profound and universal human problems. Such works are commonly disparaged or damned with faint praise by experts in relevant fields because of errors of commission or omission or because the theorizing is thought to go beyond the limits of reasonable testing and confirmation. When Braudel published *A History of Civilizations* in 1987 it was rejected as a proposed history text for use in schools because it dealt with matters thought to be too remote from the usual concerns of historians. Times change, however. Felipe Fernández-Armesto remarks, in his book *Civilizations* (2000), that after the end of the Cold War the topic of civilization is back on the academic agenda. But he still calls his book (because of the immensity of its subject matter) an "essay" (despite its 636 pages), and a "tentative" and "experimental" work. Allen also refers to his thoughts on civilization as experimental, though they are not at all short on specificity and coherence. His treatment of the subject is appropriately experimental both because he takes an unabashedly interdisciplinary approach and because he advances a novel theory in an area where there is little scholarly consensus.

Allen eschews the common practice of thinking of civilization and culture as identical, differing only in scale. He builds on a perceived strong connection between cities and civilization. "The shelter of culture" (tools, language, ritual) goes back two million years to the beginning of the genus *Homo*, whereas cities only emerge around 5800 BP. Civilization, for Allen, is not a single thing, but rather "the synergy of two intertwining processes, practices, and preferences: urbanization, or the economy of cities, and urbanity, or the ethos, the ethical culture, of enduring cities worldwide" (221). The preferences and choices of numerous people over long periods of time have consequences, including some that may limit future choices, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century the relentless spread of cities draws most of humanity into a somewhat chaotic and vulnerable urban net generating knowledge at an unprecedented rate. He thinks that this process of globalization is perhaps irreversible and that the job for philosophy is to comprehend the complex interdependence of knowledge and civilization as part of the interdisciplinary dialogue that will be necessary to attain the understanding and accommodations required to sustain human flourishing.

Allen does distinguish his study of civilization from others, past and present, and there are brief critical references to other contributors in the field. On two or three pages alone he touches on the thought of Comte, Norbert Elias, Foucault, J. S. Mill, Freud, Rousseau, Schiller, Hegel, and Samuel Huntington. But he is bent upon breaking new ground. He does not view civilization as the acme of universal history (as do Kant, Comte, and Spencer), nor does he privilege one civilization over another. He does not advance a teleological view of the development of civilization. He does not perceive civilization to be simply culture on a large scale. Civilization is conceived by Allen to be half urban architecture and half what that architecture intimates and shelters (218). There is a wealth of detail in his

treatment of topics such as the civilizing process, human violence, the alleged clash of civilizations, changes in cities over time, and the urbanization of knowledge. Suffice it to say that Allen has created an impressive armature (in the sculptural sense) for a concept of civilization which the author and his readers can add to and fill out and thus make progress toward a philosophy of knowledge and civilization, and at the same time a substantive philosophy of history, adequate to the pressing needs of our time.

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An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy

EWA PŁONOWSKA ZIAREK

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An Ethics of Dissensus is written in response to an impasse frustrating contemporary feminism and postmodern political theory: the conceptual dissociation between ethics and politics. Ziarek attempts to fuse ethics and politics in a way that moves beyond the failures of the two prevailing trends in recent theory: on the one hand, a politics of difference that avoids confrontation with the ethical structures of difference and, on the other, theories of normative obligation that fail to address the political contexts that create the need for ethics in the first place. Ziarek's procedure for synthesizing ethics and politics is to recontextualize both at the level of embodied practice. Considered at this level, ethical-political practice is clearly marked by sexual and racial differences that make problematic any attempt to separate ethical and political elements. Understanding that racial and sexual difference is constructed through political antagonism helps us recognize the value of an ethical investiture in politics. In Ziarek's view, the political sites where embodied differences gain their significance will be the field for an ethics that finally addresses embodiment without essentializing it. The advantage of this view for contemporary feminism is clear: traditional political models that neutralize and disembody citizens can be opposed without lapsing into essentialist demands for the "recognition" of difference.

One signal strength of Ziarek's book is her ability to develop a conversation with a multiplicity of voices. The book proceeds through critical expositions of Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard, Mouffe, Laclau, Kristeva, Irigaray, and others. Her skillful engagement with such a diverse range is grounded in a familiarity with the broad spectrum of Continental philosophy. The index attests to the fact that no major Continental thinker goes unconsidered. Such breadth is also apparent in Ziarek's first and only other offering, *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism* (1996), where the fusion includes Derrida, Benjamin, Cavell, and Kafka. Ziarek engages with the work of Foucault and Levinas to situate ethical practice between an "ethos of becoming" and an "ethos of alterity." She states the value of Foucault's work in terms of his conceptualization of an agency that both resists the disciplinary mechanics pervading modernity