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Book Review

Knowledge and Civilization, Barry Allen (with a foreword by Richard Rorty). Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003. Pp. 342 + x. Paperback \$35.00 ISBN 0-8133-4135-3. Hardcover \$95.00 ISBN 0-8133-4134-5.

Barry Allen's *Knowledge and Civilization* offers, in eight chapters, a wide ranging and provocative interdisciplinary discussion of the nature and value of knowledge. Richard Rorty's foreword advises that Allen's book is of the "sort...that...are more polemical than constructive" and that Allen's views are "iconoclastic". (vii, x) It should also be said, I think, that Allen's book has much to offer readers who care about knowledge. I will focus here mainly on some of Allen's specifically philosophical constructive efforts.

It is easiest to say what knowledge is not on Allen's view. Continentally inclined readers may feel some smugness when, in chapter one, Allen excoriates well known analytic epistemologists for what he calls their "epistemological bias". (3) *The epistemological bias* is roughly the conjunctive view that knowledge is fundamentally propositional and has truth, justification, and belief as individually necessary (though not jointly sufficient) conditions. But analytically inclined readers will at least appreciate Allen's evenhandedness in exposing elements of that same bias in well known continental and continentally influenced theorists about knowledge, along with a "demoralized cultural introspection" to boot, in chapters three (Nietzsche), four (Foucault), and five (Rorty). (267) *Demoralized cultural introspection* is roughly the disjunctive view that either "is skeptical that knowledge is, automatically and necessarily, a good thing", or fails to distinguish "between knowledge achieved and merely claimed", or maintains that "conversational norms.... define the *ultimate context* for understanding knowledge". (105, 144, 158) Allen's view rejects every conjunct of the epistemological bias and every disjunct of demoralized cultural introspection.

It is less easy to say precisely what Allen's positive view of knowledge is. Allen presents his positive view in chapter two with the formula that "Knowledge is...superlative artifactual performance", and he uses variants of this formula throughout the book, sometimes with "superior", "exemplary", or "cultivated" replacing or supplementing "superlative", or with "purposive action" being equated with "performance", or with "performance" being preceded by "a capacity for". (67) Allen's formula suggests—all the more so given his rejection of the epistemological bias, his occasional equation of knowledge with a capacity, and his one-time, approving use of the phrase "practical knowledge of artifacts"—that he views knowledge as being fundamentally know-how. If this suggestion is correct, then Allen's view of knowledge is kin to views common in phenomenological, pragmatist, and Wittgensteinian traditions. To be sure, Allen himself discounts this suggestion, repeatedly emphasizing that "lots of so-called know-

how is not knowledge, precisely because it does not admit the superlative; knowing how to eat with a spoon, say, or use an elevator.” (17) But Allen protests too much, I think, since much know-how does admit the superlative; knowing how to swim, say, or use a paintbrush. In fact, Allen’s view might fairly be glossed as the claim that knowledge proper is a certain sort of high-grade know-how.

It is quite difficult to say precisely what sort of high-grade know-how knowledge is on Allen’s view. For one thing, Allen’s primary formulaic phrase, “superlative artifactual performance”, is ambiguous as to whether the performer is the artifact, the maker of the artifact, or the user of the artifact. Allen’s discussion sometimes hints at a resolution of the ambiguity but often perpetuates it. For another thing, Allen asserts his formula about knowledge conjointly with a forthright global anti-realism that makes talk of *artifacts* intersubstitutable with talk of *things*. (62) Given Allen’s global anti-realism, his assertion that “the unit of knowledge...is an artifact, any artifact” is equivalent to the odder assertion that the unit of knowledge is a thing, any thing. (4) *Any* thing? Finally, since the superlativeness of knowledge is “judged by traditions of accomplishment”, knowledge is open-endedly context-relative in ways that have odd implications for Allen’s view. (72) For example, Allen feels compelled to allow that “An amulet may be a unit of knowledge” but to insist that a child’s tied shoes are not. (77, 71)

Reflecting on the combination of global anti-realism and tradition-relativity in Allen’s view, readers might wonder whether his view can really be an improvement over the demoralized cultural introspection that he rejects. Allen addresses this concern in the final three chapters, where his “argument...is interdisciplinary and experimental”. (6) His view is an improvement over demoralized cultural introspection, he thinks, because there is an “ultimate context for understanding knowledge” and that ultimate context is neither demoralized nor culturally subjective. (285) Allen conjectures that the ultimate context is “the global sapiens ecology”, which is an urban ecology, and that “Knowledge as we know it is now impossible apart from an extended urbanism, without which its most sophisticated accomplishments are meaningless, useless, junk.” (285, 246) Reflecting on Allen’s conjecture, readers might wonder whether there really is such a thing or such an artifact as a unified global urban ecology or whether, on the contrary, there is a plurality of civilizations that militates against the ultimacy of any particular artifactual context for understanding knowledge.

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