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Review essay

A coherentist epistemology with integrity

Linda Alcoff, *Real Knowing* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996)

In his book *Questioning the Millennium*, Stephen Jay Gould says that he 'refuses to speculate about the psychological source either for the angst that always accompanies the ending of centuries or for the apocalyptic beliefs that have persuaded human cultures throughout recorded history – you gotta view,' he says, 'misguided millennial passion as a primary example of our uniqueness and our absurdity – in other words, of our humanity'.[1]

I share this quote from Gould because I must confess up front that Linda Alcoff's book *Real Knowing* has evoked in me some very real 'millennial passion'. Chalk it up to my unique and absurd humanity, but in addition to recognizing the 'real' philosophical value of this book, as I read *Real Knowing* visions of a new kind of philosophy in the 21st century began to fill my head.

In this close possible world all philosophers would be, like Alcoff, skillfully versed in the traditions of both 'analytic' and 'continental' philosophy. And like Alcoff, these new philosophers would be patient and sensitive to their audience who, like lumbering, soon-to-be-extinct dinosaurs, must be moved out of their familiar territory with intelligence and understanding. Most importantly, these future philosophers would be conscious of the relationship between their work and the wider world

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM • **vol 25 no 3** • pp. 121–124 PSC

[0191-4537(199905)25:3;121–124;007861]

of social differences and the role of power in the institutionalization of knowledge.

The picture of philosophy in the 21st century that Alcoff's book inspires is one where well-reasoned, insightful, socially responsible philosophy proves to be the standard for the field. Analytic and continental divides, and the disrespect, disregard and derision they embraced, would be replaced with the language of respect, the understanding that reasoners share a world and that our pursuit of truth is an activity that entails tradition and responsibility. In Alcoff's reading of the divide, a significant relationship exists between certain trends in Anglo-American philosophy and Continental philosophy 'and this relationship seems to indicate that philosophers who never read each other should begin doing so' (83).

The need for such a change in perspective seemed especially apparent in the recent press covering the 20th World Congress in Boston. The *New York Times* (14 August 1998) ran the headline 'At the End of a Century of Philosophizing, the Answer is Don't Ask' and the *Wall Street Journal* (18 August 1998) explained that 'if there is one thing we have learned from 20th century philosophy, it is that one should go elsewhere when searching for an answer to the question: "How to live?" ' The picture of philosophy in the 20th century that the press conveyed was generated by people described as 'the most eminent living philosophers', people like Quine, Davidson and Strawson. Each was asked 'What have we learned from philosophy in the 20th century?' and each apparently 'fumbled the question one by one'. Granted, the media's hunger for quick and easy sound-bytes to complex questions is not something that we should necessarily indulge. However, the inability by some of the most well-recognized and well-respected members of the profession to communicate effectively with an interested public does speak to the lack of 'realness' in most philosophizing.

Enter Alcoff with an argument for a coherentist account of a 'real' epistemology that draws from Gadamer, Davidson, Foucault and Putnam. Incorporating some of the most interesting and original work in social epistemology, feminist theory and poststructuralism, Alcoff bridges these developments with some of the more mainstream traditions in analytic and continental epistemology and metaphysics. The central theme of Alcoff's work is to understand how we might accept claims to know, given that both analytic and continental philosophers have 'turned away from the ontology of truth' (8). The latter half of the 20th century is notable for the failures of both naive realism and traditional theories of meaning. Unlike most responses to these failures, Alcoff's proposal is to reconceive coherence rather than reformulating Foundationalism or advocating an 'epistemology of pure negativity'. Central to her account is the affect of tradition, bias, power and politics on philosophical theories of 'truth' and 'knowledge'.

What is so insightful about Alcoff's work is her skill at seeing what seems unsystematizable, from both the analytic and continental perspectives. However, rather than just naming these unanalyzed components, Alcoff offers a means for systematizing 'real' truth and knowledge out of the systematic elements mined from both traditions. Analysts like Davidson and Putnam are quite cognizant of the failures of naive realism and the analytic/synthetic distinction but they still argue for significantly non-relativist theories of truth. Davidson's holism, his characterization of the 'principle of charity' and his separation between metaphysics and epistemology, all provide Alcoff with some 'ground level' on which a common picture of the world could be constructed. Putnam's 'internal realism' and its contrast with 'subjective idealism' help to ward off the threat of 'unbridled relativism' in Alcoff's context-sensitive version of coherence. However, these philosophers leave unanalyzed significant sociological and historical factors, thus obscuring a 'real' account of knowers and their location within epistemic communities.

To 'flesh out', so to speak, these seemingly disembodied accounts, Alcoff turns to the Continent. Gadamer provides Alcoff with the historical context that her account requires, linking tradition with justification, and truth with events and human inquiry. Gadamer's acceptance of a role for tradition and prejudice within metaphysics provides Alcoff with a way of conceiving reality as selected by human communities but not arbitrary. For Gadamer, experience is in some ways constrained by reality but nevertheless reality provides for some 'play of selection'. The task for philosophers is to understand what criteria, standards and methods have been operative in human selections while also recognizing that such an inquiry is not itself separated from a tradition.

Alcoff looks to Foucault to see how an understanding of power/knowledge can be used to 'refashion rather than demolish philosophy' (116). From his explorations of particular localized systems of knowledge, such as medicine and criminal justice, Foucault sought to offer a general analysis of the processes leading to the development and implementation of rules within a system. As Alcoff reads him, the point of Foucault's genealogies is to 'multiply and deepen our practice of critical self-reflection' (119).

By aligning these various perspectives Alcoff is able to humanize epistemology and metaphysics while still making room for the possibility of norms and standards of justification. Her use of coherence preserves its virtues – the fact that it is not essentially an individualist epistemology, its ability to include seemingly disparate factors on belief formation, its immanent account of knowers and their beliefs – while adding to our understanding of the relationship between coherence and a 'real' account of truth.

The result is a robust epistemology with a sense of its own history and an eye on the future. By inviting us all to the dialogue, Alcoff has set the stage for discussing standards *and* standpoints with mutual respect and rigor. The quality arguments in *Real Knowing* provide us with a model of how philosophy could be done in the 21st century. While you might think I'm a dreamer, at least now I *know* I'm not the only one.

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Note

1 Stephen Jay Gould, *Questioning the Millennium* (New York: Harmony Books, 1997).