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**Linda Martín Alcoff**

*Real Knowing: New Versions of the  
Coherence Theory.*

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What can continental philosophers, particularly Gadamer and Foucault, teach Anglo-American analytic epistemologists about the coherence theory of knowledge? 'Plenty', Alcoff hopes to show. 'Practically nothing' is, however, the answer that emerges from her book.

Alcoff contends that the coherence theory has three advantages over its main competitor, foundationalism: its assumptions are closer to actual psychological and social facts about knowers; it explains how epistemic justification can depend on political and moral influences; and it accommodates the notion that truth inheres in, rather than transcends, human language. She also aims to encourage 'a dialogue between analytic and continental philosophy' (3) by showing how Gadamer, Foucault, and other continental figures can help solve three problems facing analytic versions of coherentism: (a) the difficulty of showing how the coherence of beliefs can contribute to the likelihood of their truth in a way that makes them epistemically justified; (b) coherentism's preoccupation with propositional knowledge over against the non-propositional knowledge embodied in social practices; and (c) the worry that striving for epistemic coherence is 'based on totalitarian impulses' (15). As Alcoff admits, only problem (a) has bothered analytic epistemologists, and so in discussing (b) and (c) it's not clear that she is still addressing an analytic audience.

Alcoff examines several positions familiar to analytic epistemologists: internalism and externalism about justification, coherentism about justification and about truth, global relativism, and global skepticism. Unfortunately, she shows signs of misunderstanding every one of those positions.

She misrepresents internalism when she suggests that only externalist theories require that justification be truth-conducive. 'If his is primarily an externalist theory ... then it is a theory which links justification to truth-conduciveness' (56), she says, as if internalist theories required no such link. No self-respecting internalist denies that justification must be truth-conducive; that's why coherentists recognize that problem (a) is a problem for them. She asserts that on 'an internalist account of justification ... for a belief to be justified a believer must be able to give an account of how the belief came to be justified' (92), a false assertion that ignores the crucial distinction her colleague William Alston has drawn between *having* a justification and being able to *give* one.

She misunderstands externalism when she implies that imposing a truth-condition on knowledge makes one an externalist: according to Alcoff, Michael Williams's contextualist theory 'has an externalist component' because 'Williams rejects the identification of knowledge with justified belief' (221),

a criterion that would make every analytic epistemologist on the planet an externalist. She classifies Foucault as an externalist 'precisely because Foucault relates justified beliefs not to the intentions of believing subjects but to the ways in which statements come to be *labeled* "true" (133, emphasis added), in which case Foucault is an externalist of a stripe that few, if any, analytic externalists would recognize or welcome.

She also seems to misconstrue coherentism about justification and coherentism about truth, even while making them the focus of her book and even while arguing that the former gains plausibility when conjoined with the latter. For example, in her eagerness to portray Foucault as a coherentist of both kinds, she ends up claiming that 'even displacement and exclusion' count as relations of 'mutual support' among propositions or beliefs, 'in the sense that these disparate operations are grounded in specific forms of connection between elements' (128). But if a proposition and its negation can offer each other 'mutual support' simply in virtue of their specific connection (each logically excludes the other), then the notion of mutual support relied on by both kinds of coherentism has run amok: only logically independent propositions could fail to cohere. She contends that the coherence theory of truth enables coherentist epistemology to overcome problem (a), the problem of truth-conduciveness, but she never makes a persuasive case for that contention. Indeed, late in the book she concedes an important point without realizing how much trouble the concession makes for her: 'it confers little warrant on a justified belief to say that justification is conducive to truth if truth is simply defined in terms of justification' (196). Why isn't that claim equally true if we replace 'justification' with 'coherence'?

Global relativism, says Alcoff, implies 'the all-encompassing suspension of belief' (180). It implies no such thing: the global relativist feels entitled to retain his beliefs because, on his view, they are as true as any beliefs get. She dismisses global skepticism, a position she calls 'arguably ... psychotic' (87): 'If radical skeptical doubts are generated without any specific reason, they cannot be addressed,' she asserts; 'to entertain skeptical doubts cannot improve our knowledge' (226). Both parts of her assertion are belied by an impressive recent literature in analytic epistemology that has addressed (if not resolved) such skeptical doubts and improved our understanding of knowledge.

Alcoff's misreading of important positions will not inspire confidence on the part of the analytic epistemologists she hopes to convince. Neither will her frustratingly imprecise use of crucial terms. Without ever saying what she means by 'validity', for instance, she writes of the 'validity conditions for knowledge' (2); 'the validity conditions for justified belief' and 'the validity conditions for any serious speech act' (3); the 'valid' pronouncements of authorities (27); the validity of self-satisfaction (54), of ancient texts (54), and of the strands of a tradition (205); a 'criterion of validity for competing beliefs' (173); 'valid descriptions' (186); the 'relative validities' of beliefs (216); and 'skepticism's claim to validity' (223) — thus indulging in both vagueness and ambiguity, two concepts she conflates (173). Without ever explaining her

strange usage, she uses 'a priori' as a count noun (148), making the passage in which it occurs, like many others in the book, opaque.

Even in Alcoff's sympathetic treatment, Gadamer and Foucault don't look very relevant, and her conclusions about their value to analytic epistemology are surprisingly, but perhaps wisely, hedged (e.g., 114). Indeed, it's often hard to tell just where Alcoff herself comes down, since some of her pronouncements seem impossible to harmonize. She repeatedly endorses Gadamer's line that knowledge and truth are irreducibly linguistic (18, 36, 71, 73) but then says that 'belief ... in my view, need not be articulable in propositional or even linguistic form' (168). She never explains how knowledge depends on language even though belief apparently doesn't, but then much that needs explaining goes unexplained in this disappointing book.

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**Joyce Appleby, Elizabeth Covington,  
David Hoyt, Michael Latham, and Allison  
Sneider, eds.**

*Knowledge and Postmodernism in  
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This book explores over four hundred years of philosophical engagement with the nature of knowledge and attempts to place postmodern thinkers and thought in a historical perspective. The book presents key extracts from the works of thirty-one seminal authors, from Bacon to the contemporaries, with the idea that this selection will make clear to the reader not only what postmodernism is but also what it is not and what it is reacting to or against. Such a project is an obviously useful one and the book seems to be designed to appeal to undergraduate readers with a general interest in history or philosophy.

*Knowledge and Postmodernism in Historical Perspective* consists of an introduction and a selection of pieces divided into five broadly chronological sections: *The scientific revolution and Enlightenment thought*; *Nineteenth-Century social theory*; *Challenges to Nineteenth-Century theory*; *Postmodernist thought*; and *Responding to Postmodernism*.