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# Medieval and Early Modern Epistemology:

*After Certainty*

*(Volume 17:  
Proceedings of the Society  
for Medieval Logic and  
Metaphysics)*

Edited by

Alex Hall, Gyula Klima and Martin Klein

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# INTRODUCTION

MARTIN KLEIN

This volume had its origin in a workshop in Paris in 2018 which brought together Sebastian Bender, Christophe Grellard, Martin Klein, Stephan Schmid, and Jacob Schmutz in order to discuss with Robert Pasnau his most recent monograph, which had just appeared on the market: *After Certainty: A History of Our Epistemic Ideals and Illusions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).<sup>1</sup> Immediately after our meeting we considered the idea of a publication based on the symposium, and I am very much indebted to Gyula Klima and Alex Hall for this opportunity to present it in the Proceedings of the Society for Medieval Logic and Metaphysics.

*After Certainty* tells the history of epistemology and its pitfalls from Aristotle to the present day. The main text of the book originated with the Isaiah Berlin Lectures which Pasnau was invited to give in Oxford in 2014. But the project expanded: in the book, the original six lectures are supported by long and detailed endnotes. How to navigate through this monumental work and what are its core theses is laid out for each lecture at the beginning of the present volume by the author himself. Pasnau's overview of *After Certainty* is then followed by five comments which cover almost all of the lectures.

Martin Klein concentrates in his comment on John Buridan, who plays a pivotal role in *After Certainty* in at least two respects. In Pasnau's Lecture Two ("Evident Certainties"), Buridan is important in the transition from medieval to early modern epistemology for introducing the idea that evidentness and certainty can come in degrees. Klein thinks—more than Pasnau does—that, according to Buridan, what is later called "moral certainty" is enough for knowledge and is not too different from the evidentness required for the natural sciences. However, with regard to

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<sup>1</sup> Referred to throughout this volume as *After Certainty*, followed by the relevant lecture and page numbers.

Buridan's understanding of the distinction between *per se* sensibles and proper sensibles and the extent to which he allows the senses to have a privileged access to sensible reality, Klein considers Buridan's innovations less significant than Pasnau does in his Lecture Three ("The Sensory Domain").

Sebastian Bender's "Reductivism and Relationalism" also concentrates on Lecture Three, scrutinizing Pasnau's distinction between a reductivist and a relationist path in seventeenth-century theories of perception. Reductivists take it to be literally the case that we represent geometric-kinetic patterns when we perceive a colored object—a quite implausible account, as Pasnau suggests in his lecture. Relationalists, on the other hand, seem to be better off in holding that the idea of a color does not represent geometric-kinetic patterns, but nevertheless represents something real in the material world, namely, a power. Bender objects that a closer look at Leibniz and Spinoza shows that the reductive account is less implausible than it initially seems, while the relationist account seems less attractive, given that it depends on an arbitrary divine coordination of sensation with what is sensed.

In "Indirect Realism," Sabine van Enckevoort and Han Thomas Adriaenssen comment on Lecture Four ("Ideas and Illusions"). Are the immediate objects of perception fundamentally mind-dependent entities? If they are, how does such a view relate to skeptical worries? If there is one figure before the seventeenth century who seems to have defended such a claim, it is Peter Auriol. Nevertheless, Auriol still tries to defend a kind of identity between the extramental real being of a cognized object and the "apparent being" the object takes on in being cognized. As Enckevoort and Adriaenssen show, it is not clear how Auriol can defend this claim, since neither numerical nor specific identity seems to be available to him, even by his own theoretical standards. Regarding the second question, Enckevoort and Adriaenssen reject the claim that "indirect realism somehow generates skeptical questions that direct realism does not" (p. 56). Rather, what leads to skepticism is not indirect realism, but the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (underlying both skepticism and indirect realism).

In Lecture Six ("Deception and Hope"), Pasnau considers some of the lessons we can learn from the history of epistemology. If certainty can no longer be the ideal of knowledge, and yet we want to avoid falling into Humean epistemic defeatism but rather to take an optimistic stance, what

could this optimistic stance be? Pasnau's answer is that the best epistemic attitude we might find lies not on the rational side of the mind, but rather on the affective: he proposes that the right epistemic attitude is one of hope. To believe out of hope is distinguished from the three traditional epistemic attitudes of knowledge, opinion, and faith. It leaves behind the unattainable ideal of certainty, but this lack of certainty does not imply the fear that one's belief is wrong, nor does it require cognitive confidence. With hope, as Pasnau puts it in his overview in this volume, "without elevating one's credence through faith, one might simply stop fearing that one is wrong" (p. 19).

Concentrating on Lecture Six, the last two comments in this volume ask how we are to understand Pasnau's remedy of believing out of hope and whether there are other options for us to pursue beyond certainty. Stephan Schmid, first of all calling into question Pasnau's narrative, is not so sure where to draw the line in identifying the last champions of certainty. While Pasnau opts for Descartes, Schmid advised us not to overlook the tradition of rationalism and German idealism. Schmid is also critical of Pasnau's conception of epistemic hope, if this attitude does not require some sort of cognitive justification; if it does, however, then it is unclear to him how this position differs from Hume's.

Christophe Grellard takes up the idea of social epistemology. In "Beyond the Ideal, the Social?," Grellard first emphasizes that skepticism should not be underestimated as a real problem in the history of epistemology, especially in the Middle Ages. Pasnau's conception of hope might introduce new skeptical worries, since it seems that hope could introduce "other forms of error (in the form of self-deception for example)" (p. 78). More importantly, Grellard raises doubts about how the affective aspects of hope could be more helpful than the cognitive aspects which hope might share with faith. As an alternative to distinguishing hope from faith, Grellard suggests that we focus on the theory of faith in its connection with moral certainty. He suggests that late medieval theories of faith introduced "the idea that it is not by an individual process that I can secure my action, but by relying on a principle of trust that is warranted collectively" (p. 84).

This volume concludes with "Some Thoughts after *After Certainty*," in which Robert Pasnau replies to the comments individually.

I had the pleasure of organizing the original meeting in Paris together with Christophe Grellard (EPHE) and Jacob Schmutz (Sorbonne Université) during my stay as a visiting research fellow at the Centre Pierre Abélard (Sorbonne Université) and the Laboratoire d'Études sur les Monothéismes (EPHE) with the financial support of my home institution at that time, the Topoi Excellence Cluster in Berlin. I am very grateful to Christophe and Jacob for their kind invitation to Paris, and in particular for giving me a free hand in the conception of the workshop while they took care of all the rest. The symposium became possible thanks to the generous funding of various Parisian institutions: Paris Sciences & Lettres, the École Pratique des Hautes Études, the Laboratoire d'Études sur les Monothéismes UMR 8584, the Sorbonne Université, and the Institut Universitaire de France. The Topoi Excellence Cluster provided funding for the publication of this volume, enabling it to benefit from the careful work of a language editor, Ian Drummond, who also translated Christophe Grellard's contribution. Finally, I would like to thank both Robert Pasnau and all the commentators for participating in this discussion about the history of epistemology.

# OVERVIEW OF *AFTER CERTAINTY*

ROBERT PASNAU

Back in the mid-aughts, when I was doing the research for what would become my previous book,<sup>1</sup> I thought that I was working on a single work which would encompass metaphysics and epistemology. But eventually the metaphysics overwhelmed everything else, and I set aside my research on epistemology. That changed when I was invited to give the Isaiah Berlin Lectures in Oxford in 2014. *After Certainty*, the subject of the symposium of which the present volume is a record, is a considerably augmented version of those lectures.

The heart of *After Certainty* is six chapters, each of which is the descendant of one of the lectures I gave in Oxford. After the lectures comes a collection of endnotes of such length that they are longer than the main text of the book. In an attempt to make this structure more reader-friendly, I wrote the endnotes so that they could be read continuously, separately from the main lectures, with the idea that readers would first read the lecture itself without interruption, and then turn to the endnotes if they wanted further scholarly details.

The range of the book is extremely wide, as will be evident from the breadth of the issues raised by the commentators in this volume. The book goes back to Aristotle, whom I discuss at some length in several of the chapters, and runs all the way forward to Hume, who also gets discussed at some length. Occasionally I make quite sweeping claims about the *whole* history of philosophy, for which some of the commentators take me to task. The book also differs from my earlier books in attempting to reach conclusions that are not just historical but also systematic. This is something I did not attempt in *Metaphysical Themes*, in part because I find myself lacking in many convictions about metaphysics. I find Aristotelianism tempting, but I also find Humean reductionism tempting.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011).

Topics in metaphysics strike me as fascinating but wholly bewildering. In epistemology by contrast, I am much more opinionated, and my opinions come forth at various points in the book, as I will try to indicate briefly in this overview.

The book begins on an autobiographical note, with my long struggle to write about medieval epistemology. I, like many others, have written about medieval cognitive theory, and about medieval philosophy of mind. But what exactly is medieval epistemology? This query is connected to the observation I make at the very beginning of the book, with regard to the history of epistemology, that “any serious attempt at such a history should confront, from the start, the surprising fact that, of all the main branches of philosophy today, epistemology is the most alienated from its history” (lect. 1, p. 1). The idea that finally made it possible for me to write systematically about the history of epistemology is the idea of an *idealized epistemology*. Rather than taking as its goal the analysis of our concept of knowledge, an idealized epistemology aspires first to describe the epistemic ideal that human beings might hope to achieve, and second to chart the various ways in which we commonly fall short of that ideal. Although epistemology today does not conceive of itself in this way, it seems to me that we can understand much of the theorizing about knowledge that runs from antiquity into the modern era by thinking of it in these terms. Once we do, we can also see how, by and large, the history of philosophy is the record of the gradual diminishment of that ideal, as we reconciled ourselves over the centuries to lower and lower expectations.

**Lecture One** begins with Aristotle’s project in the *Posterior Analytics*. On my account, it should be understood not as an attempt to characterize scientific method, but rather as an ideal theory, or what it would look like to frame a body of knowledge in the best possible way – best possible, that is, for beings such as us, in the kind of world we live in. This last qualification introduces an important theme of the book: that epistemology, pursued in this way, inevitably goes hand in hand with metaphysics, because one can hardly begin to think about the epistemic ideal without some view about what the ideal objects of knowledge are, which in turn requires a metaphysical decision about whether one is a Platonist, an Aristotelian, a nominalist, and so on.

The Aristotelian concept of *epistēmē* eventually makes its way into Latin as a theory of *scientia*, and dominates much of the history of philosophy up until the seventeenth century. Throughout, it is understood as a

statement of ideal theory. As Albert the Great remarks of *scientia* in the prologue to his *Posterior Analytics* commentary (1261), “This is the end and the most perfect and the sole unconditionally desirable thing among the logical sciences.”<sup>2</sup>

A critical part of the notion of an idealized epistemology is that it attempts to describe not a perfect ideal, of the sort that a god might achieve, but rather an ideal calibrated to us, given the nature of our cognitive powers. An ideal of this sort might seem to be just a descriptive project, but it is also normative. In seeking to establish the cognitive ideal, the theory aims at answering a question that lies at the heart of epistemology: When should ordinary agents, in ordinary circumstances, believe the things they believe? This way of proceeding insists that a normative account of our epistemic position, non-ideal as it is, presupposes ideal theory. Thus, we can speak of a *normative ideal*. Here I make a systematic and not merely historical suggestion: that this way of engaging in epistemology is likely to be more fruitful than the project of finding the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. Indeed, inquiry into the ideal might lead us to modify what we mean when we talk about “knowledge,” so that epistemology, rather than simply describing how we use our epistemic language, might be in a position to revise that usage.

With this picture of an idealized epistemology in place, the rest of the book traces how various ideals established in antiquity and the Middle Ages were gradually abandoned in later centuries. In Lecture One, the focus is on the Aristotelian ideal that knowledge requires the grasp of a thing’s essence. This is a demand found in the *Posterior Analytics* itself, and it is very prominent among the scholastics, coming to lie at the heart of their causal theories. The theory gets challenged in the seventeenth century in various ways, of which two are most prominent. First, there is the Lockean challenge: that although there are real essences, they are undiscoverable and, moreover, they lack the explanatory generality that the Aristotelians had assumed. Second, there is the challenge to the very idea that the epistemic goal should be to grasp the underlying causes of things. First in Galileo and then in Newton, it came to be a hallmark of the new science to refuse to enter into metaphysical speculation about essences and other such deep causes.

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<sup>2</sup> Albert the Great, *Analytica posteriora* I.1.1 (ed. P. Jammy, *Beati Alberti Magni Opera* [Lyon, 1651], vol. 1, p. 514a): “Est ergo finis et perfectissima et sola simpliciter desiderabilis inter logicas scientias.”

In place of this ideal, Galileo and especially Newton adopted the ideal of *accuracy*, an ambition described most famously in Newton's preface to the *Principia*. This in turn has been immensely important to our modern conception of the epistemic ideal, particularly in those domains we now think of as sciences. Here is where science begins to form its identity as a discipline distinct from philosophy, defined in part in terms of a distinct ideal. It even becomes possible to think that science may be possible where knowledge is not, as in Hume, who takes himself to be constructing a science of human nature.

So where does that leave philosophy? On the one hand, it could turn its back on these new scientific ideals, and continue its pursuit of deep causal explanations, not as a chapter of science but as metaphysics. Leibniz is the shining early example of this approach, and his efforts at articulating a metaphysics that could transcend natural philosophy would shape German philosophy through Kant and beyond. On the other hand, philosophy might embrace the new scientific conception of the epistemic ideal, and hence begin to assume a similar modesty regarding conjectural causal explanations. The early champion of this approach, which sets itself against the speculative metaphysics of the scholastics, was Locke. Within this English tradition, epistemology comes to be perceived as a foundational topic in philosophy, as it has remained to this day.

**Lecture Two** begins with Descartes, and argues that he fits into the longer history of figures who pursue an idealized epistemology. Here I argue that we can understand Descartes's quest for *scientia* as the pursuit of an ideal, characterized by certainty, foundationalism, and internalism. This is what the epistemic ideal requires. But, I argue, it is a mistake to think of Descartes as having a theory of *knowledge*. One indication of this is that he thinks no one has ever had the kind of *scientia* that Descartes seeks. If *scientia* is knowledge, then the absurd implication would be that Descartes is a complete skeptic regarding the history of human thought up until his own time. Another indication is that he does not think that *scientia*, or its lack, should regulate our beliefs. That puts too much distance between his epistemic ideal and our conception of knowledge for it to be plausible that he is offering us anything like a theory of knowledge.

Perhaps the best known feature of Descartes's epistemology is his emphasis on certainty. This raises the question of where that emphasis comes from. Surprisingly, this is an aspect of the ideal that Aristotle did not stress; however, it emerged as a theme in quite a few different places,

notably among the Stoics, within the Alexandrian commentary tradition on Aristotle, and in Arabic philosophy. Indeed, the Arabic translation of the *Posterior Analytics* repeatedly uses the Arabic word for certainty (*yaqīn*) where there is no corresponding word for certainty in the Greek text.

It is not at all easy to work out the various notions of certainty that play a role in epistemology over the centuries. One important distinction, however, is between subjective certainty and objective certainty, where the first is simply a subjective sense of confidence, and the second the fixedness or necessity of the object or proposition in question. Neither of these notions of certainty, on its own, can represent the epistemic ideal. Rather, the two need to be linked in some way, so that the things we are highly confident of are the things that necessarily obtain. Beginning in the Middle Ages, the theoretical concept that most often did this work was *evidentia*, or evidentness.

What is it to be evident? For scholastic authors, evidentness is the bridge that connects the purely objective and the purely subjective senses of certainty. Roughly speaking, it is the all-important quality that distinguishes *scientia* from mere true belief. Indeed, although historians have paid it little systematic attention, evidentness is *the* central epistemic concept among both scholastic philosophers and their critics; it features prominently first among Aristotelians, then in Descartes and throughout the seventeenth century, and even up to the time of David Hume.

We can speak of an evident cognition, or we can speak of things in the world being evident to an individual. (Evidence in our modern sense is an extended sense of the term, which refers to the information in virtue of which a thing is evident to someone.) But what exactly is such evidentness? One of its central features, historically, is that it delivers indubitability. Ideally, evidentness would also yield infallibility, and so one of the perennial questions becomes whether the ideal goal of infallible evidentness can ever be realized.

The most remarkable development of a theory of evidentness is that of John Buridan in the mid-fourteenth century. Buridan distinguishes three levels of evidentness:<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Buridan, *Quaestiones in Metaphysicam* II.1 (ed. Jodocus Badius, *In Metaphysicam Aristotelis Quaestiones argutissimae Magistri Ioannis Buridani in ultima praelectione* [Paris: Prelum Ascensianum, 1518; repr. Frankfurt a.M.: Minerva, 1964], fols. 8v–9r).

- *evidentia simpliciter* (first principles and their logical consequences)
- *evidentia naturalis* (on the supposition that the common course of nature is observed)
- *evidentia moralis* (suffices for acting well morally)

For Buridan, the last of these is fallible, and indeed is compatible with the proposition being false. Since Buridan talks about moral evidentness explicitly in only one passage, and not at much length, various important questions of interpretation arise with regard to his view. It is not clear, for instance, what the connection is between this weak form of evidentness and morality. It is also not clear whether *evidentia moralis*, when concerned with a true proposition, amounts to *scientia*. Buridan himself does not use the phrase “moral certainty,” but this idea, so labeled, becomes very important in later scholasticism, and the word “moral” in this context comes to lose all association with morality, meaning instead *almost, but not quite*.

The rise of interest in moral certainty corresponds to a growing tendency to regard the ideal of certainty as too remote a goal to be a normative epistemic ideal. Accordingly, when we get to the seventeenth century, we find a great many authors interested in the status of beliefs that are merely probable. This is not a wholly new development, but there is a new emphasis at this time on probability, particularly in English authors such as William Chillingworth, John Tillotson, Joseph Glanvill, John Wilkins, and Robert Boyle. To be sure, these developments did not go uncriticized. Thomas White, for instance, criticized Glanvill, and by extension the whole Royal Society, for wanting to “tear science itself out of the hands of the learned, and throw it into the dirt of probability.”<sup>4</sup>

The critical figure, ultimately, becomes John Locke, who articulates the principle of proportionality: that we should believe to the degree our evidence suggests that a proposition is likely. But Locke persists in thinking of *knowledge* as an ideal, one which we can only rarely achieve. To understand how our current conception of knowledge arises out of these discussions, I look in some detail at the less well-known case of John

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas White, *An Exclusion of Scepticks from All Title to Dispute: Being an Answer to the Vanity of Dogmatizing* (London: J. Williams, 1665), p. 55. For an important new study of probability in the later scholastic tradition, see Rudolf Schuessler, *The Debate on Probable Opinions in the Scholastic Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

Wilkins, who associates knowledge not with the highest ideal of certainty, but with mere moral certainty. This requires violating the principle of proportionality, because for Wilkins we are in effect entitled to believe fully in things that are not fully certain.

**Lecture Three** turns to a special case of evidentness, the evidentness that arises from sensory perception. The chapter begins with an observation about how common it is to find the assumption, in a wide variety of camps, that there is some “domain of epistemic privilege” where the senses are perfectly (or nearly perfectly) reliable. One way to achieve such a domain—the subject of Lecture Four—is to look within, at our own ideas. Lecture Three, by contrast, focuses on those who find some sort of domain of reliability outside of us.

In Aristotle, this domain is the proper sensibles. I argue in some detail that we should understand Aristotle as defending a relational view of the sensibles. Thus, if one wants to know what a sound is, Aristotle’s answer is that it is a power (a potentiality) to produce the experience of hearing. In general, instead of treating a sensible quality as entirely independent of perceivers, Aristotle makes its nature depend on its perceivers, whose actualization is the actualization of the sensible quality. In my terminology, rather than treating sensible qualities *absolutely*, he treats them *relationally*. This kind of theory is a concession to Democritus, and his talk of how hot and cold, sweet and bitter, and colors exist by convention. What is right about this, Aristotle thinks, is that these sensible qualities can be defined only by reference to our sensory powers.

Yet Aristotle’s sort of relationalism, I argue, is not the view of later Aristotelians. On that later view, the sensible qualities are real, absolute, mind-independent features of reality. They are natural kinds, fundamental features of reality with which the senses interact, and which get detected in virtue of that interaction. This is what is known today as Aristotelian realism.

Various aspects of Aristotelian realism get challenged by some medieval authors, most notably Nicole Oresme and John Buridan. Oresme speculates that the object of sight is not color but light—or, equivalently, that color just is the reflection of light off of objects, a strikingly modern view. Buridan calls into question the very idea of a privileged domain of sensible qualities. For one thing, he argues, contrary to Aristotle’s text, that the senses are as reliable when it comes to the common sensibles as

they are when it comes to the proper sensibles. Even more fundamentally, he denies that the senses have any privileged access to the proper sensibles (as opposed to various other features of objects). On the standard medieval view, the proper sensibles are privileged in virtue of an especially tight causal relationship between sensory experience and a set of qualities in the world (color, sound, flavor, odor, heat). But Buridan claims, to the contrary, that sensation presents in a confused way all of the various external sensible objects, without having any sort of privileged access to any of them and without even representing any of them as distinct from any other. On this picture, the very distinction between *per se* and *per accidens* perception collapses. All these standard aspects of the medieval theory end up being true, for Buridan, only insofar as we impose such distinctions at the intellectual level.

Of course, it is in the seventeenth century that such doubts fully take center stage. At this point the standard scholastic story about perception becomes radically inverted: the proper sensibles are no longer the privileged sensory domain, but have been demoted to mere “secondary qualities”; instead, what is most real are the kinetic-geometric features of the world, now called the primary qualities. These become the domain where the senses get things right, if they get anything right at all.

I focus in particular on Descartes’s complex views about perception. On my story, he is tempted by three different kinds of views about sensible qualities: a *relationalism* akin to Aristotle’s, a *reductionism* that would treat color and the rest as simply particles in motion, and a *subjectivism* that would identify sensible qualities with internal sensations. Ultimately, he rejects the first two for the same fundamental reason—namely, that they fail to respect an ideal that he, and others, tacitly take for granted, which is that perception should be not just *reliable* but also *faithful* in its depictions of reality. By “faithful” I mean that the senses should show the world as it is, in “high fidelity.” Holding out for this ideal, Descartes tends toward subjectivism.

Relationalism gets taken up later in the century by Boyle and Locke. But they too fail to embrace it fully, and instead end up mixing it with a sort of subjectivism because they lack a metaphysics that would be adequate to make sense of relationalism. Even though they propose that sensible qualities should be understood as powers, their metaphysics is too reductive to allow for an ontology of powers.

**Lecture Four**, accordingly, turns inward, to the way of ideas. It begins with the remark that the seventeenth century is much more exceptional here than is generally realized, for this is the only period in the history of philosophy in which ideas are widely taken to be the immediate objects of perception. The central question of the lecture is why this is so.

To make progress on this question, it is helpful to distinguish between two claims. The first is the claim that there are inner representational vehicles distinct from acts of perception; I call this a *dual view*. The second is the claim that these inner representations (that is, *ideas*) are the objects of perception; I call this a *mediated view*. Although there is little doubt that both views are characteristic of the era, there is a lot of controversy about whether one or another seventeenth-century author holds a dual view or a mediated view. Many scholars of the period seem quite eager to rid their heroes of one or both of these views. This strikes me as strange, because really we ought to celebrate this feature of the period as one of its most distinctive and intriguing characteristics. How can it be, as Malebranche writes, that “tout le monde” accepts that external objects are not seen and that ideas are instead the immediate objects of perception, when hardly any philosophers of other eras can be found who endorse these claims?

The central conclusion of the lecture is that much again turns on the expectation of fidelity. Without this, it is easy to conclude that the senses have as their object something in the external world, because there is no need to find something in the world that the senses show us in high fidelity. But the desire to achieve fidelity, when paired with the rise of mechanism, drives seventeenth-century authors toward mediated theories of perception, because the mechanical philosophy makes it natural to conclude that there is nothing out in the world that corresponds to phenomenal sensory experience. So the way of ideas, on my telling of the story, is wrapped up with the theory of secondary qualities. Thus Malebranche insists that Augustine himself would have held a mediated theory of perception but for his being in the grip of “the prejudice that colors are in objects.”<sup>5</sup> And thus it later seems to Hume that “the fundamental principle” of the “modern” philosophy is “the opinion concerning colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold; which it asserts to be nothing but impressions in the mind.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Malebranche, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. A. Robinet, 20 vols. (Paris: Vrin, 1959–1966), 6: 68.

<sup>6</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* I.4.4, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 226.

This way of understanding the seventeenth-century debate should not lead us to a mistakenly crude interpretation of scholastic views. Contrary to what their critics suggest, the scholastics could not have maintained the absurd view that phenomenal experiences are out in the world. Still, they did think that those experiences track the basic physical structure of nature. For they supposed that sensible qualities—hot and cold, wet and dry, but also, secondarily, colors, tastes, and odors—are basic features of the natural world. Seventeenth-century philosophy could draw on advances in science to reject this sort of view. But if the senses are not tracking the basic physical structure of nature, then they are not faithfully capturing what is in the world. Since Descartes and his successors wanted to maintain fidelity, they looked inward for the objects of perception.

In making that inward turn, these authors made a different kind of mistake, since what we now know is that the senses don't faithfully capture what goes on *inside* the mind either. Descartes's commitment to transparency is as bad a mistake as the scholastic commitment to realism about the secondary qualities. What we should conclude, then, is that the senses don't show us anything in high fidelity: they don't show us what goes on outside the mind, nor do they show us what is happening inside the mind, which is, after all, just patterns of neurons firing. Once we give up on fidelity, we can go back to the commonsensical view that the objects of perception are external. There is no longer any reason to find the way of ideas at all compelling.

**Lecture Five** turns toward the epistemic ideal at the level of intellect. It begins with what I call, drawing on Anselm's *De casu diaboli*, chapter 12, the "Anselmian glance" (lect. 5, pp. 94–95). This is a kind of epistemic ideal: that we seek to get the entirety of an argument in our head all at once, so that we can grasp as a whole every premise and the conclusion from which it follows. The desirability of doing this is connected to a certain sort of epistemic privilege: the way we privilege the self, and the way we privilege the now. Putting these together, I speak of the "privileged me now".

There is an interesting question here that is properly one for philosophy of mind: How much can we think all at once? This was a much debated issue in scholastic philosophy. Then there is a more properly epistemic question: Does the epistemic ideal of *scientia* require grasping a piece of demonstrative reasoning all at once, in a single Anselmian glance? There was a fairly extensive fourteenth-century debate about this, and it was not

clear whether such a synoptic grasp is possible or whether, if it is possible, it is even desirable. There were also debates here about how reasoning works: whether it is fundamentally instantaneous, or whether it should be thought of as an event that takes time to be efficacious.

But setting aside these difficult issues about how the mind works, I take it for granted in this lecture that, one way or another, there is fundamentally something ideal about coming as close to the Anselmian glance as possible. From here the lecture looks ahead to Descartes, who is likewise quite concerned with achieving something as close as possible to an Anselmian grasp of a whole argument. This is especially evident in the *Meditations*, where he stresses the importance of being able to grasp the whole course of his argument in a single Anselmian glance. Within the privileged now, the arguments of the first three meditations go through with the highest level of human certainty, without our having to presuppose the truth of their ultimate conclusion, which is that God exists. That ultimate conclusion is required, however, in order for these evident perceptions to be preserved beyond the privileged now as stable and certain dispositions within the mind. Such *scientia* endures beyond the limited time of philosophical achievement when one holds the whole argument in one's head. And to have *that*, one has to be able to hold something else in one's mind, namely, the conclusion that there is a benevolent God who would not let me go astray when I reason properly. One retains this conclusion even while not philosophizing, and someone who keeps it in mind can have the highest humanly possible level of *scientia* in an ongoing way regarding the nature of the soul, the body, and the world around us. All this is highly relevant to the puzzle of the Cartesian circle, and the degree of certainty that Descartes thinks his method affords us.

From here, the lecture goes on to look at two contrasting cases. First, I look at Locke, who rejects Descartes's privileging of our present reasoning. He thinks that it is enough that at some point in the past we reached a conclusion on the basis of valid reasoning. Even if we have entirely forgotten what that reasoning is, the historical fact that we did at one point carry the reasoning out is sufficient to make us justified in our present confidence.<sup>7</sup> This is a much lower standard than Descartes insists on.

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<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* IV.1.9 (ed. P. H. Niddich [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], pp. 528–529).

Second, I look at Hume, who also puts great weight on the privileged now, but in a way precisely contrary to Descartes's. Indeed, Descartes's insistence on the "privileged me now" gets strangely transmogrified in Hume, embraced not as the foundation of reason but as the only escape from rational self-destruction. The first-person present is where rational arguments have their full force, but what those arguments show, on close inspection, is that reason "entirely subverts itself."<sup>8</sup> Rather than arriving at an ideal *scientia* of ourselves and of the world around us through the Anselmian glance, Hume thinks that such intense reflection leads us to recognize the groundlessness of all reasoning. Accordingly, whereas Descartes must take measures to shore up our accumulated certainties against the ravages of time, Hume positively welcomes "carelessness and inattention" as the sole "remedy" against skepticism.<sup>9</sup> Escaping the destructive influence of critical reflection, Hume contends that the best we can do—the only ideal to which human beings can and ought to aspire—is to follow the sensitive part of our nature.

Building on the case of Hume, **Lecture Six** turns toward skepticism. I begin with an inventory of various medieval skeptical scenarios, focusing in particular on the familiar worry about a deceiving God. This became a standard topic of discussion in the fourteenth century. One prominent line of reply is concessive: it consists in the claim that this possibility shows that we cannot have absolute certainty about anything, but only a conditional certainty—conditional on the assumption that God is not deceiving us. This is similar to Buridan's position on merely natural certainty. A bolder line of reply, taken by John of Mirecourt in the mid-fourteenth century, holds that God's ability to deceive is subject to a surprising limitation. For even if God can infuse thoughts directly into us, causing us to think certain things, there is a sense in which it is not *we* who are having that thought. Instead, the thought is something like an alien invasion: it is not our thought, but God's thought, forced upon us. Mirecourt does allow that God can deceive us in another way: God can, for instance, simply create illusions in the world around us (patterns of light, say) and thereby cause us to believe that we are seeing things that are in fact not there. But if we focus on self-evident truths, for which we do not rely upon the senses, Mirecourt thinks that not even God can cause us to have a false belief. This seems not to have persuaded many that we are completely invulnerable to divine deception, even when it comes to

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<sup>8</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* I.4.7 (ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., rev. P. H. Nidditch [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978], p. 267).

<sup>9</sup> Hume, *Treatise* I.4.2 (ed. Selby-Bigge and Nidditch, p. 218).

apparently self-evident truths. One common way out, then, was to turn the tables on the divine-deception worry, and argue that, in view of God's goodness, rather than worrying about the possibility that God is deceiving us, we should trust in God as a guarantor of our ability to grasp the truth, either through some kind of direct Augustinian illumination or (more commonly among late scholastics) simply as the creator of our reliable faculties.

This leads into an extended speculative excursus, in which I contemplate the possibility that not even God can guarantee our infallibility, because not even God is infallible. The basic idea here is that if we try to imagine the experience of a being that seems omnipotent, eternal, all-knowing, and all the rest, we have to allow that this experience might be an illusion. Perhaps this supposed God is a mere god-in-a-vat, and not a perfect being at all. We can stipulate, of course, that if God is God, then God cannot be deceived. But the question is how anyone, even a perfect being, is capable of assuming a position outside itself from which it can confirm that things are as they seem to be. So I conclude that "not even the most perfect cognitive being is capable of perfect certainty" (lect. 6, p. 124). If this is right, then we can see the full absurdity of the demand for perfect certainty. As a matter of logic, *no being* could be perfectly and unqualifiedly certain.

Does this entail that our worst fears of skepticism are true? Here I think it is important to be clear about the different things that might go under the label of skepticism. On the usual meaning of the term, a skeptic is someone who denies knowledge. But reflection on the case of God shows that the skeptic must take the word "knowledge" to be categorically inapplicable, not just to us as a species, but to any species. But this is an intolerable result: it is perfectly apt and useful to be able to say, in a wide range of circumstances, that people *know* one thing or another. It would be the most wildly absurd of overreactions to allow the bare logical possibility of error—grounded in nothing about the human condition—to shut down such ways of talking. Indeed, the verb "to know" is so indispensable that if on skeptical grounds we were not allowed to use it, we would have to go out and find some other word to take its place.

Again, however, if we focus on the epistemic ideal, we can say that these reflections on the divine case merely highlight how far our epistemic situation falls short of the ideal. We might have thought that there are some things that we can grasp with ideally perfect certainty, but in fact it

seems very plausible that we can never achieve such certainty. Even worse, there is a case to be made that, ultimately, we can never have any positive evidence one way or another for any of our beliefs. This is the dismal verdict that I label “epistemic defeat.” It holds that ultimately there are no good non-circular, non-question-begging reasons for anything. I do not argue in the book for epistemic defeatism, or even claim that it is true. I claim only that this is a historically important thesis that is not at all an absurd view. It is the kind of view that the ancient skeptics held, and that Hume would later hold. The view is not well represented in the Middle Ages, but there is a sense in which it might be thought of as something of a platitude—that is, as an *obvious* view. Consider Aristotle’s famous dismissal of skepticism: “Their mistake is that [...] they seek a reason for that for which no reason can be given; for the starting point of demonstration is not demonstration.”<sup>10</sup> The idea that all arguments have to stop somewhere is not far from the idea of epistemic defeat.

The threat of defeatism in epistemology parallels the recurring suspicion in other philosophical domains that we are unable to produce a robustly satisfying, realistic explanation of our most ordinary assumptions. Such doubts are indeed one of the hallmarks of modern thought across all the most basic philosophical questions, ranging over morality, freedom, perception, truth, and language. Consider in particular the moral domain. The moral realist, seeking to capture the assumptions embedded in our ordinary lives, thinks that the rightness of an action has some kind of objective ground that makes it morally good, independent of contingent facts about what human beings happen to care about. For the moral antirealist, by contrast, there is no such objective ground; if we can aptly speak of moral rightness at all, it is a function only of what we in fact happen to value. Epistemic defeatism poses an analogous challenge. Those who deny defeat hold that there are ultimate, objective evidential grounds that make some beliefs more rational than others. According to the epistemic defeatist, by contrast, if one can aptly speak of beliefs as being rational at all, those beliefs must ultimately take their rationality from subjective facts about what believers happen to think. In place of objective evidential grounds, the best we can do is make dogmatic assertions of privilege. Just as the moral antirealist despairs of any argument that runs from *is* to *ought*, so the epistemic defeatist despairs of our ability to go from *seems* to *is*.

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<sup>10</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV.6, 1011a12–13, translation from *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

That brings me to Hume. Hume is very critical of skepticism in its ancient form for supposing that it involves the suspension of belief. But what Hume accepts is precisely epistemic defeat. It follows from his arguments that we are left with “not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life.”<sup>11</sup> So how does Hume justify our beliefs? He does so by rejecting Locke’s principle of proportionality—or more generally, by denying *evidentialism*. Hume’s way forward is to embrace a kind of quietism: he simply stops striving after such ideals and focuses his attention instead on how nature in fact operates. Abandoning the hope of grounding our beliefs in reason, he thinks that we need to begin by registering the fact that we *do* form certain sorts of beliefs, and that we cannot do otherwise.

At this point I suggest that we can do better than this sort of anti-theoretical quietism. But what other options are there? First, there is *faith*. To hold a proposition on faith, as I use the term, is to believe it firmly, and thus to attach high credence to it, even though one does not suppose that the evidence warrants such confidence. Believing on faith, so understood, directly clashes both with evidentialism and with Lockean proportionality, which is why it strikes so many as utterly disreputable. I suggest that it is better to believe on the basis of *hope*. To understand how I conceive of hope here, three background ideas are needed: first, a distinction between credence (level of confidence) and belief (commitment to truth); second, the idea that credence and belief can vary independently of one another; and third, the idea that belief requires freedom from an affective attitude of fear. This last builds on the scholastic idea that distinguishes mere *opinion*, which involves a fear of the contrary being true, from *assent*, which removes this fear of the contrary. One way to reach assent is through the evidentness that yields knowledge. Another way to reach assent is through faith. The third way is through hope: without elevating one’s credence through faith, one might simply stop fearing that one is wrong. Instead of fearing and hoping in equal measure, one would place one’s hopes entirely in being right, and hence one would believe. This is very far from the sort of ideal that philosophers historically had hoped to be able to achieve. But it may be the best we can do.

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<sup>11</sup> Hume, *Treatise* I.4.7 (ed. Selby-Bigge and Nidditch, pp. 267–268).



# JOHN BURIDAN BEING AFTER CERTAINTY

MARTIN KLEIN

*After Certainty* is so rich that a short response like this can address only a few aspects of it. It might seem to be mere nitpicking if I concentrate on what Pasnau has to say about just one of the many authors whose theories and opinions he arranges so skillfully in presenting us with not just a panorama of views, but also a coherent overarching story, in both systematic and historical terms. However, if there is one particular author who plays a central role in such a project, a reply like this might be justified. I will therefore focus on the one whom Pasnau rightly calls “the most important philosopher at the most important university in the world for three decades in the mid-fourteenth century” (lect. 3, p. 59): John Buridan.

Buridan plays a prominent role in Pasnau’s broader narrative as a thinker who significantly transformed traditional theories. With his innovations—which are significant in themselves—Buridan cleared the path for the dramatic steps taken later. Though Buridan did not go as far as thinkers of the seventeenth century would, he did, according to Pasnau, have sufficient theoretical resources to do so. In one case, he did not go far and seems to have been inhibited by his commitment to the philosophical tradition. In another case, he seems to have wanted to go further, but was prevented by the external pressure of threats from authority.

The first case has to do with Buridan’s theory of knowledge. In Lecture Two (“Evident Certainties”) Pasnau argues that Buridan was the first scholastic philosopher who distinguished clearly between different levels of evidentness. Buridan maintained that absolute certainty is not necessary for something to count as knowledge, and that conditional certainty is sufficient, a view which became commonplace in the seventeenth

century.<sup>1</sup> But, according to Pasnau, “Buridan offers just the barest anticipation of the changes that are to come” (lect. 2, p. 34).

The other case has to do with Buridan’s epistemological stance on perception as described in Lecture Three (“The Sensory Domain”). Here Pasnau claims that Buridan significantly undermines basic Aristotelian distinctions which were thought to secure sensory access to the world as it really is. In doing so, Buridan could already have reached the conclusion generally credited to early modern philosophers. In one of the very few historically counterfactual passages in his monograph, Pasnau states:

If external conditions had been different, the “modern” revolution of the seventeenth century might well have happened in the mid-fourteenth century. If it had, the vanguard of that movement would have been the two philosophical giants of the era, John Buridan and Nicole Oresme. (lect. 3, p. 57)

However, Buridan and Oresme found themselves under threat of condemnation, and so were prevented from making an epistemological revolution. Nevertheless, Pasnau records some significant revolts already going on in Paris at the time.

In my comments, I want to consider two questions. Regarding Buridan’s theory of knowledge, I will consider whether his position is in fact that far from the significant changes which Pasnau thinks are to come later. Regarding Buridan’s theory of perception, on the other hand, my question is, whether he was in fact as rebellious as Pasnau takes him to be.

## Theory of Knowledge

Let me start with the role Buridan plays in Lecture Two. Here Pasnau investigates how infallible certainty as the crucial ingredient of the normative ideal of epistemology was replaced by mere probability. Buridan is central to the story, as told in this lecture. Not only does Pasnau use him to explain the concept of certainty (*certitudo*) and evidentness (*evidentia*), he also credits him with changing significantly the view of what kind of certainty can be achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> In Lecture Six (“Deception and Hope”) Pasnau underscores this contribution of Buridan; see pp. 118–119.

Pasnau makes clear that what distinguishes knowledge from mere belief or opinion is certainty. Things can be believed with a high degree of subjective certainty, even if what is believed to be true is actually false. In order to distinguish knowledge from subjectively certain but objectively false beliefs, the concept of evidentness is crucial. Only if one is certain about a proposition (or about what is stated by the proposition) because of its evidentness can one be said to have knowledge. Thus, what distinguishes knowledge from mere opinion is not simply that we are subjectively unable to doubt what we believe, but rather that the proposition is assured to be true. As Pasnau summarizes very nicely:

Throughout the Aristotelian tradition [...] certainty comes in two flavors, objective necessity and subjective confidence, which get tied together by evidentness to yield infallibility. This picture of certainty, though commonplace, omits something crucial: the possibility of a certainty that is conditional upon the information we hold, or what is now known as epistemic probability. (lect. 2, p. 38)

Buridan's transformation of the Aristotelian theory includes this conditionalization of certainty by distinguishing three degrees of evidentness. In the highest degree of certainty, which would later be called *metaphysical certainty*, it is simply impossible for us to go wrong. First principles, such as the principle of non-contradiction, are absolutely evident. Principles in natural philosophy, by contrast, are only conditionally evident, that is, on the assumption that the common course of nature is not disturbed by supernatural intervention; Buridan calls this *natural evidentness*. Finally, concerning our moral actions, it suffices to have what would later be called *moral certainty*, as when a judge sentences someone after having carefully taken everything into consideration even if, unbeknownst to the judge, the accused is in fact innocent.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See *After Certainty*, lect. 2, p. 34, and Buridan, *Quaestiones in Metaphysicam* II.1 (*In Metaphysicam Aristotelis quaestiones argutissimae Magistri Ioannis Buridani in ultima praelectione*, ed. Jodocus Badius [Paris: Prelum Ascensianum, 1518; repr. Frankfurt a.M.: Minerva, 1964], fol. 9va): "Immo est adhuc debilior evidentia quae sufficit ad bene agendum moraliter, scilicet quando visis et inquisitis omnibus circumstantiis factis quas homo cum diligentia potest inquirere, si iudicet secundum exigentiam huiusmodi circumstantiarum, illud iudicium erit evidens evidentia sufficiente ad bene agendum moraliter, etiam licet iudicium sit falsum propter invincibilem ignorantiam alicuius circumstantiae. Verbi gratia, possibile est quod praepositus bene et meritorie ageret suspendendo unum sanctum

Regarding this lowest degree of evidentness, Pasnau claims that we might take Buridan to have in mind a notion of evidentness which is close to the modern notion of justification: that is, the judge's verdict is rightly decided, given all the evidence available to him.<sup>3</sup> However, Pasnau does not see Buridan as having arrived there quite yet, since it is unclear whether he would accept that this kind of evidentness is enough for *scientia*. The crucial difference between Buridan and seventeenth-century philosophers, according to Pasnau, is that the latter think moral certainty is good enough even for natural philosophy, for which Buridan would require a stronger notion of evidentness. The type of evidentness which Buridan has in mind here does not quite line up with knowledge in the modern sense of warranted belief: this *evidentia* is less about being certain about something given the evidence one has, but more about being certain because the proposition, as well as the cognition of it, is evident.<sup>4</sup>

I want to propose a different reading of Buridan's account by suggesting that we can understand assent with certainty to an evident proposition in terms of the proposition being justified. Thus, my answer to Pasnau's question whether, according to Buridan, moral certainty suffices for *scientia*, will be yes, whereas Pasnau thinks that it is not quite clear. If I am correct, Buridan turns out to be a proponent of epistemic probability.

What makes it difficult to answer the question whether Buridan maintains that moral evidentness is enough for something to count as knowledge is that he has so many different conceptions of knowledge that, according to Pasnau, it becomes unclear where "to place the boundaries between what is and is not knowledge" (lect. 2, p. 35). Unfortunately, says Pasnau, this is a question in which Buridan did not show much interest (see lect. 2, n. 15, p. 199). In fact, Buridan distinguishes among several kinds of knowledge, the first two of which are crucial for the distinction between natural and moral evidentness. Science is not only about what is necessarily

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hominem quia per testes et alia documenta secundum iura sufficienter apparet ipsi quod ille bonus homo esset malus homicida."

<sup>3</sup> For interpretations of Buridan's theory of knowledge in terms of warranted or justified belief, see Jack Zupko, "On Certitude," in J. M. M. H. Thijssen and Jack Zupko (eds.), *The Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy of John Buridan* (Leiden: Brill 2001), pp. 165–182, and Dominik Perler, *Zweifel und Gewissheit: Skeptische Debatten im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2006), ch. 32, esp. at p. 368.

<sup>4</sup> See lect. 2, p. 35. Pasnau accordingly distinguishes three different senses of *evidentia* (p. 33).