Book Review


Anti-individualism holds that a subject’s thoughts are partly individuated by features of his/her environment. While this view dominates current philosophy of mind, it seems to be open to several important epistemological objections. These objections include: that it is incompatible with the privileged access that a subject has to his/her thoughts; that it undermines the possibility of rationality; and that it provides a novel a priori route to knowledge about the world. In her new book, Anti-Individualism and Knowledge, Jessica Brown defends anti-individualism from these objections. Although it will not be possible to elucidate every nuance of Brown’s discussion in a review such as this, I will give an overview of her arguments in order to provide the reader with a general idea of Brown’s contribution.

In the first chapter Brown sets out some distinctions that lay groundwork for the rest of the discussion. Brown’s book can then be divided into three sections, one for each of the aforementioned objections. In the first section, Brown deals with the privileged access objection. Brown suggests that there are two ways to argue for the incompatibility of anti-individualism and privileged access. These include the discrimination argument and the illusion argument. Brown summarizes the discrimination thus, “According to the discrimination argument, anti-individualism threatens privileged access by undermining a subject’s ability to distinguish a priori between the thought contents she actually has and the thought contents she would have in various counterfactual situations” (p. 37). While the discrimination argument applies to all permutations of anti-individualism, the illusion argument only applies to one possible version of anti-individualism, illusion anti-individualism. In the end, the illusion argument is similar to the description argument in that both suggest that a subject cannot have a priori knowledge of his/her thoughts if there are relevant alternative situations where his/her thoughts would be different but in which he/she could not tell the difference. Brown suggests that the common response to both the discrimination argument and the illusion argument is to accept that such relevant situations are possible while stressing the reliability of a subject’s a priori knowledge of his/her thoughts. Brown argues that such a strategy has been ineffective and proposes an alternate strategy. She suggests that instead of accepting that there are relevant alternative situations it is more effective to argue that alternate situations are not normally relevant. She writes, “If the alternative situations are not normally relevant then they are not normally knowledge undermining, even if knowledge requires discriminative abilities” (p. 154).
In the second section of the book, Brown deals with the claim that anti-individualism undermines rationality. The argument that anti-individualism undermines rationality can be summarized as follows: since a subject’s thought contents are partly individuated by his/her environment, it follows that in order for a subject to know whether two thoughts have the same content or not, he/she would have to investigate his/her environment. This suggests that a subject could sometimes be wrong about whether two of his/her thoughts had the same or different content. Brown astutely points out, “Sameness and difference of reasoning are crucial for reasoning. If a subject makes mistakes about the sameness and difference of content, she may make mistakes about the logical properties of her thoughts” (p. 157). Brown defends anti-individualism by suggesting that the problem may not be with anti-individualism, but rather with the concept of a rational subject who can conform his/her thoughts to the laws of logic a priori. She further claims that even if you do not believe that anti-individualism is correct, there are reasons to reject such a conception of rationality.

In the final section of the book, Brown considers the claim that anti-individualism provides a novel route to knowledge of the world. This argument focuses on the consequences of combining privileged access and anti-individualism. Brown outlines the main steps of the argument as follows (p. 272):

1. Sally can know a priori that she thinks water is wet. (*From the assumption of privileged access.*)
2. Sally can know a priori that if she thinks that water is wet, then her environment contains water. (*From the assumption of anti-individualism.*)
3. Sally can know a priori that her environment contains water. (*From 1 and 2.*)

Brown points out that some have used this argument to show that anti-individualism is incompatible with privileged access while others have used it as a novel strategy to combat skepticism. Brown argues that the argument cannot be used for either purpose because the argument fails; anti-individualism does not support the second step. It does not support the claim that a subject can have a priori knowledge of a specific link between her thoughts and her environment. Therefore, without step 2, the argument fails.

As one can see from the preceding discussion, anti-individualism has been challenged by a number of epistemological objections. Brown responds to each and shows that these objections do not serve to discount anti-individualism. Brown does an excellent job of explaining the objections, discussing the more common solutions, and offering her own solutions to the problems discussed. I suspect that anyone interested in philosophy will find this well worth the read; those interested in philosophy of mind or epistemology will find this especially true. I whole-heartedly recommend this book.

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