

# Working Without a Net

## *A Study of Egocentric Epistemology*

RICHARD FOLEY

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## Preface

Part of the fascination of philosophy is the way topics blend into one another. You are writing on what you take to be a well-defined topic, but to your surprise you soon find yourself writing about something that antecedently would have seemed to have been a quite different topic. This is the experience I had with this book. As a result, I often found it difficult to say in a simple, unequivocal way what the book was about. I even heard myself giving quite different descriptions of it, sometimes in the course of a single day. Eventually, I came to realize that these various descriptions were equally accurate and that it might be useful to set out at least a few of them in a preface.

I do so with some reluctance. A well enough written book would not need a preface to tell the reader what it is about. Besides, authors who use a preface to explain themselves tend to look either presumptuous or diffident—presumptuous if their explanations are motivated by the assumption that only they are in a position to understand the significance of their views, and diffident if their explanations are motivated by too great a fear of being misunderstood.

So, in providing a list of some of the ways that I have found myself describing my project, I'm going against my better instincts. To make myself feel at least a little better about this, I make the list brief:

1. The project shows how the theory of rational belief can be regarded as a part of a perfectly general theory of rationality. Thus, the first few sections of the book deal with questions of rationality wherever they arise, and then in the later sections questions of rational belief are regarded as instances of these general questions. The search is for a theoretically unified way to think about rationality, so that the rationality of belief does not turn out to be a fundamentally different kind of phenomenon from, say, the rationality of decision or the rationality of action. This also suggests a working procedure, one that stresses parallels between questions, problems, and puzzles that arise for theories of rational decision, rational action, rational strategy, and the like on the one hand and the theory of rational belief on the other. The presupposition is that if a puzzle arises for one, it is likely to have an analogue for the other. Emphasizing these analogies is often a useful first step in finding a way through the puzzles.

2. The project is one of meta-epistemology. I present a way of thinking about the subject matter of an epistemological theory, and this in turn provides us with

some guidance as to what we can expect such a theory to do and what we cannot expect it to do. These might seem to be relatively straightforward matters, but it is one of my themes that a variety of projects are done under the name of epistemology. Although these projects report their conclusions using the same cluster of epistemic terms—terms such as “rationality,” “justification,” “warrant,” and “evidence,”—in fact they have different aims and different contents. As a way of making sense of this variety, I propose a way to think about judgments of rationality wherever they arise and a corresponding way to think about philosophical accounts of these judgments. The result is a taxonomy for epistemology. And the taxonomy itself is suggestive; it suggests promising ways of thinking about a range of epistemological issues, such as the distinction between epistemic and nonepistemic reasons for belief, the epistemic significance of simplicity and other theoretical virtues, the relevance of radical skeptical hypotheses, the difference between a theory of rational belief and a theory of knowledge, the difference between a theory of rational belief and a theory of rational degrees of belief, and the limits of idealization in epistemology.

3. The book is an extended essay on Cartesian epistemology. “Cartesianism” has become something of a dirty word in philosophy. To convict someone of Cartesian views, whether it be in epistemology or philosophy of language or some other area, is thought to be equivalent to a *reductio*. It is to implicate the person in a way of thinking about philosophical issues that the history of philosophy shows to be dead-ended.

My view is that the history of philosophy has no such simpleminded lessons for us, but it does have its share of ironies. One of its ironies is that despite the fact that Descartes is the most influential of all modern epistemologists, there are no Cartesian epistemologists. Perhaps there never were. In the entire history of philosophy, perhaps Descartes was the only Cartesian. Indeed, there are those who doubt whether even Descartes was a Cartesian in the usual sense of the term. Be this as it may, the Cartesian project does have its appeal, in part because of its dramatic quality but also for philosophically more respectable reasons. My task is to inquire into these reasons. It is to ask what if anything is worth doing of the Cartesian project. No one thinks that it can be done in its entirety, and this has provoked some into proclaiming the death of epistemology, as if epistemology just were Cartesian epistemology. But of course, even if not everything in the Cartesian project can be done simultaneously, there may be aspects of the project that can be done individually and that are worth doing. This is what I will be arguing. In particular, I will be defending an egocentric approach to epistemology. However, I will insist, contrary to Descartes, that egocentric epistemology be done in a nondefensive manner—one that resists the temptation to search for guarantees of truth or even likely truth.

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In preparing this book, I have made use of some previously published material. Section 1.4 is based on “Rationality, Belief and Commitment,” *Synthese* 89 (December 1991), 365–392; section 1.5 on “Evidence and Reasons for Belief,” *Analysis* 51 (1991), 98–102; sections 2.1 and 2.2 on “Skepticism and Rationality,” in G. Ross and M. Roth (eds.), *Doubting: Contemporary Perspectives on Skepticism* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), 69–82; section 3.3 on “What Am I to Believe?” in S. Wagner and R. Warner (eds), *Beyond Physicalism and Naturalism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); section 4.3 on “Probabilism,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 15 (1990), 114–129; sections 4.2 and 4.5 on “The Epistemology of Belief and the Epistemology of Degrees of Belief,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (1992), 111–124; and section 4.6 on “Being Knowingly Incoherent,” *Nous* 26 (1992), 81–203.

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