

SOME FEATURES OF RICHARD FUMERTON'S PHILOSOPHICAL
VIEWS
(Orange Beach Epistemology Workshop, May 2014)

PART ONE

I first met Richard at Brown where we were part of the same entering class. From the beginning, he was the star of the class. We both learned a lot about doing philosophy there, but I was doubly fortunate, since I also learned in talking philosophy with Richard. I also saw first hand with him just how productive and how much sheer fun talking philosophy could be.

In the years since, Richard has produced an enormous number of important publications: seven authored books, two edited books, and more articles than I was willing to try to count, including two we jointly authored. I'll talk briefly about one of them later.

For the most part, I'm going to be focusing on Richard's latest book: *Knowledge, Thought, and the Case for Dualism* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

The first thing to say about this book is that it's terrific. I mean really terrific. Not just run of mill, grade inflation "terrific." All of Richard's usual characteristics are on display, most especially, tremendous clarity and a contrarian spirit that is willing to follow the argument wherever it goes.

Something I want to emphasize, however, is the remarkable scope of the book. It's primarily a defense of property dualism, but in the process of mounting the defense, there's a vast range of other positions Richard defends. Here's a very partial list:

*A radical empiricist version of foundationalism.

*A particular version of internalism, what he calls "internal state internalism," which asserts that the epistemic status of a belief depends solely on the internal states of the believer; the contrast is to

access internalism, which implies that one can always determine by introspection whether one is justified.

*A doctrine of direct acquaintance.

*A defense of there being multiple and simultaneous acts of direct acquaintance, ones that are capable of providing epistemological foundations. In particular, for certain kinds of facts, one can be directly acquainted with the fact that P but also with the thought that P and the correspondence between the two.

*A defense of regress arguments, indeed two kinds: the familiar one about the chain of epistemic reasons needing a stopping point and a less familiar conceptual regress argument. The conceptual regress argument is that we cannot even understand the concept of inferential justification without presupposing a concept of non-inferential justification

*A defense of a strong principle of inferential justification, the principle being that S has justification for believing one proposition X on the basis of another Y only if S is justified in believing Y and has justification as well for believing Y makes X probable.

*A defense of a causal theory of physical objects. In Richard's own words: "When we think and talk about physical objects and their properties we are always thinking about those objects and properties in terms of the causal role they play in affecting our conscious life." (*Dualism*, 212-213)

These are some of the positive theses. There are also a large number of negative theses.

For example, there's his rejection of all forms of externalist accounts of justification. They all, Richard argues, fall prey to some version of the so-called "new evil demon problem," which makes use of the following idea associated with internal state internalism: if two people are in precisely the kinds of same internal states, then whatever justification the one has for believing some proposition, the other also has.

In addition, he addresses and rejects a variety of widely held positions outside epistemology proper. But in a sense for Richard these positions are not really outside epistemology, since one of the central claims of his book is that if one takes the above epistemological views seriously, one cannot continue to hold these positions. So, for example, he rejects:

*All physicalist and all functionalist accounts of phenomenal states and intentional states, such as belief, desire, fear, and so on. The phenomenal properties with which we are acquainted are not “functional properties, dispositions to behave, or properties of the brain” as is often thought.

*All holistic theories of meaning.

*All versions of methodological naturalism in philosophy of mind, and with it the view that cognitive science has light to shed on philosophical questions on the nature of mind.

*All causal theories of reference.

In any event, you get the idea. This book stakes out positions on a very wide range of issues.

But rather than dwell on the arguments Richard makes for these positions, I want to go up a level and talk about some general characteristics of the various positions he defends not only in this book but also in his other works over the years, characteristics that I think make Richard one of the most distinctive and important philosophical voices of our time.

PART TWO

I’m going to single out five such characteristics, but three of are so intertwined with one another that it’s best to treat them together. Here are the first three.

1. For Richard, knowledge is not really one of the core concepts of epistemology nor for that matter among the most interesting.

2. For Richard, skeptical threats cannot be decisively defeated; we need to acknowledge this, learn to live with it, and even appreciate that there are benefits associated with living with it.

3. For Richard, taking seriously the first person perspective is important not only for epistemology but for philosophy in general.

That knowledge is not the most important concept of epistemology might seem a surprising or even perverse position for an epistemologist to adopt, given that the history of the subject has largely focused on what is involved in having knowledge.

In another sense, however, it's not all that surprising. For anyone who has sympathy with a justified true belief approach to understanding the concept of knowledge, which Richard does, the core concepts of epistemology are ones of justification, truth, and belief. Out of these comes the concept of knowledge. Knowledge in this sense is a secondary concept, a derivative one.

This is of course contrary to the views of some well-known contemporary epistemologists, but it's hardly an unusual view. The justified true belief approach to knowledge is well-known. So, this isn't what makes Richard's positions so distinctive. It's when his other views are layered on top of this approach that something distinctively Fumertonian emerges.

First, he insists that not just any kind of justification will do in explicating knowledge. It has to be a particular kind of justification, namely, one concerned with epistemic reasons for belief, where epistemic reasons for believing are ones that make probable the truth of the proposition believed.

Second, he insists, as I mentioned a moment ago, that the relevant notion of epistemic reasons cannot be captured by an externalist analysis. The relevant sense has to be internalist.

I want to dwell for a moment on why Richard thinks this, using a striking passage from another of his books, *Epistemology*, which is his contribution to Blackwell's First Books in Philosophy Series.

Here's the passage (97-98):

"Let's suppose I believe there is a God, roughly along the lines set out by the Judeo-Christian tradition. It doesn't require a whole lot of sophistication to realize it is no accident that people like me, growing up in a culture dominated by the Judeo-Christian tradition, are more likely than not to have such beliefs, at least at some time or other in their development. But I'm now waxing philosophical. I'm taking Cartesian advice and I'm trying assure myself that this isn't some odd irrational belief."

He continues: "The reliabilist tells me, or at least should tell me, that my belief in God might not only be justified but non-inferentially justified. It was long part of many religious traditions that the "Chosen Ones" had God's existence revealed through "divine inspiration." If there is such a thing as divine inspiration, it's not a bad candidate for a belief-independent, unconditionally reliable belief-forming process.it's also not a bad candidate for a belief caused "directly" by the fact that makes it true. It's also a pretty good candidate, I imagine, for a belief that would track the truth of what is believed. So maybe I've got myself a non-inferentially justified belief in God's existence, at least as the reliabilist, the causal theorist, or the tracking theorist understands non-inferential justification. But should I possess such justification, would it do me any good *at all* in satisfying my intellectual curiosity? Should I possess such justification, would it do me any good *at all* in giving myself the assurance that was shaken by my brief excursion into philosophy? Internalists think that possessing the sort of justification defined by externalists would be utterly irrelevant to possessing the kind of justification we seek when we try to put our beliefs on a secure footing --- the kind of justification that gives us assurance."

As an aside, he then adds: "Now it may be that internalists want something they can't have." I'll come back to this aside later.

The crucial attitude Richard is drawing attention to in these passages is one that he calls “intellectual curiosity,” and the key aspiration associated with this attitude is that of seeking first person epistemic assurances. The relevant question for Richard is: what am I to believe? With an emphasis on the “I.” Thumping one’s own chest, as it were.

This is worth stressing, because it’s the attitude, aim, and kind of question that got most of us into philosophy to begin with. It begins with personal puzzlement. What grabs many people about philosophy is its character as a personal intellectual search.

The fact that the task is personal does not bring with it relativistic baggage. There are truths about the questions to which philosophers seek answers, but the questions are so difficult and so intertwined with one another that nothing like consensus is to be expected. At one point in *Dualism* (91), Richard trenchantly observes that all positions in philosophy are minority positions. So, when arriving at a view, the attitude to adopt is: if others agree, so much the better, but really what is at stake is figuring out answers to these questions for oneself.

Nor does the personal nature of the search mean it should be conducted privately. On the contrary, for all the obvious reasons, it’s best conducted publicly. This decreases the chances of being trapped within a bubble of self-reinforcing views and thus increases the chances of correction. Still, in the end one has to make up one’s own mind.

The importance placed on the first person perspective is one of the additional layers in Richard’s epistemology that is added onto the notion of knowledge being a secondary concept. Now comes another layer. Richard argues that if one takes the questions of the first person perspective seriously and also insists on high standards for knowledge, it turns out that skeptical concerns about knowledge can be raised about pretty much everything.

In Richard’s view, in the search for first person assurances, we have no choice but to begin with the internal world, but he also admits that it is then difficult to mount a defense of very many of our common

sense beliefs about the external world. This is what he's referring to in the quote I cited earlier: "Now it may be that internalists want something they can't have."

The "it may be" here refers to the possibility that we are just going to have to live with the reality that there is little we know. This is in fact Richard's view, which in turn reinforces his sense that knowledge is not all that important, in just the way that other things we can't have aren't all that important.

This has proven to be a difficult position for most epistemologists to live with. They tend to want guarantees. If not Cartesian guarantees of certainty then at least assurances of our general reliability, or even more weakly assurances that our common sense beliefs about the world are not radically mistaken. They want to be defenders of common sense. Many even adopt this as a test of adequacy. An adequate epistemology must have the resources to defend common sense.

Richard's position, by contrast, is that all attempts to refute skeptical worries or sidestep them or define them out of existence fail and indeed are misguided.

There are those, for example, who claim that it is metaphysically impossible for our beliefs to be radically in error. According to them, there's something about the nature of belief or reference or our cognitive equipment that makes this impossible.

In his book on property dualism, Richard discusses Putnam's well-known argument to this effect about the brain in a vat hypothesis. Richard points out that even if we grant to Putnam the key presupposition of his argument, namely, that unless the brain interacts with that world outside the vat, it cannot form beliefs about that external world (including the belief that it is a brain in a vat), it's easy to see that serious skeptical worries can still be mounted. All that is needed is to recast the skeptical hypothesis as one in which the brain has been only very recently envatted, in which case even on Putnam's views, the brain can have beliefs about the external world much the same as ours, but those beliefs, or at least those about its current external environment, will be largely in error.

Then there's also the paper that Richard and I jointly wrote on "Davidson's Theism," a tongue in cheek title that was intended also to make a serious philosophical point. Davidson had tried to use an argument from radical interpretation to conclude that it's impossible for someone's beliefs to be largely mistaken, an argument that made use of a hypothetical omniscient interpreter. Our paper pointed out that the argument is sound only if the omniscient interpreter actually exists. A merely hypothetical omniscient observer didn't get Davidson the conclusion he wanted. Hence, his commitment to theism. Descartes notoriously tried to argue that an omnipotent and perfect good God would not permit that which is indubitable for us to be false. We took some juvenile delight in pointing out that Davidson's argument requires a similar commitment to theism.

A second way of trying to sidestep skeptical worries is by arguing that natural selection provides assurances that our beliefs are reliable. In his very first book, *Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception* (pp. 24-30), Richard made the point that even if it is granted that natural selection has programmed our cognitive equipment to generate true beliefs (itself a problematic assumption), nothing follows about our having the justified beliefs we need for knowledge (on the justified true belief conception of knowledge).

A third way of trying to avoid skeptical problems is by lowering the standards of knowledge. Richard admits that intuitions about when someone has knowledge can be mixed and sometimes seemingly even at odds with one another. There are plenty of everyday examples where we ascribe knowledge to ourselves or others if we think there is a high enough probability of truth, but it's also easy enough to describe cases where the intuition seems to be that we don't have knowledge unless there is no possibility of error.

Richard argues that the lottery problem, problems with closure generally, and Gettier issues all suggest that at least while doing philosophy, we ought to adhere to a strict sense of knowledge with its high standards, a sense that excludes the possibility of error. Better to stick with the high ground even if we are forced to a conclusion that there is little that is known. Besides, as I alluded to earlier, for

Richard there are benefits associated with this “little that we know” conclusion.

The benefit he stresses most is that this conclusion is “ontologically liberating”. (*Dualism*, pp. 218-225) Liberating because it frees us from the hopeless task of trying to understand the mental in physicalist terms, a project that has occupied much of philosophy’s energy in recent years. Richard argues that if we embrace the view that what we believe about physical objects is only what we infer about them from their causal effects on us as sentient beings and if we also as a result embrace a skepticism about our ability to know the intrinsic character of physical objects, we can see that the direction of the reductionist task is mistaken. If anything the direction should be reversed. Here is a representative passage:

“We have a better, and more immediate grasp of the mental than we have of the *theoretical* posit that is the physical world and its properties. If anything, we should be more concerned to reduce the physical to the comfortable, more familiar world of the mental than we should be interested in reductions that move in the opposite direction.” (*Dualism*, 143)

There’s an additional side benefit that Richard doesn’t mention, probably because it is one that extends beyond philosophy. Namely, positions of the sort that Richard defends provide a healthy antidote to dogmatism and a correspondingly strong disincentive against thinking one has a corner on truth. There is a direct and powerful line from the position that we lack assurances of truth or even reliability to a case for intellectual humility and restraint. Think of Richard in this regard as a modern day Locke.

Recall Locke’s principle that the degree of confidence we place in a claim ought to be proportional to the degree of evidence:

“The mind, if it will proceed rationally, ought to examine all the grounds of probability, and see how they make more or less, for or against any probable proposition, before it assents to or dissents from it, and upon a due balancing the whole, receive or reject it, with more or less firm assent, proportionably to the preponderance of the

greater grounds of probability, on one side or the other.” (John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, chap.15, 5.)

Locke thought this principle important not just because it was correct but also because it was socially useful. In particular, he thought that if people adhered strictly enough to the principle, it would be an effective corrective to the religious “enthusiasts” of his time whose arrogant confidence in their own views Locke believed was tearing apart the social fabric of Europe.

Our era has its own collection of enthusiasts, and views like Richard’s potentially provide a corrective to the problems that their claims of certitude create for us.

This, moreover, may be a corrective that every era needs, since humans seem to be inveterate believers. When we begin to have confidence in the truth of a claim, we find it tempting to seek out reinforcing evidence while avoiding sources of information that might potentially challenge us. The drift, as a result, is towards greater and greater certainty.

This problem is made all the worse in our time because we live in an era of sound bites, instant experts, and limited attention spans, where a hesitancy to take firm stands is sometimes regarded as a sign of intellectual weakness or even a slippery character. For a species of chronic believers, however, the more serious danger is that of overly hasty feelings of certainty. The view Richard defends, and the resulting emphasis on the virtues of intellectual humility and restraint, is a useful corrective. It in effect whispers to us that it ought not to be easy to have firm, fixed opinions.

But rather than dwelling on these benefits and embarrassing Richard with comparisons to Locke, I want to move on to mention briefly two final general characteristics of Richard’s work that make him and his work so distinctive

One is that he offers a philosophical system in a period when, to make an understatement, philosophical systems are not much in vogue. It’s a system that Richard has been developing ever since his

days at Brown, one grounded in his radical empiricism and foundationalism.

I've already mentioned the wide range of positions Richard commits himself to in *The Case for Dualism*. All of these positions come out of this grounding, and over the course of Richard's career (in the other works I briefly referred to earlier – the seven books and almost countless articles) he has used the very same grounding to extend his system to virtually all the major areas of philosophy, not only epistemology but also metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and value theory.

Philosophical systems are rare in our time, but there are of course lots of examples of such systems in the history of philosophy. However, in most of these cases, the philosophers in question set out (indeed often enthusiastically) to construct a system. In Richard's case, he has become a systematic philosopher reluctantly. He had to be dragged to it, as it were. He admits in *Dualism* that when you can get away with it, it's better when arguing for a particular philosophical claim to commit oneself to as few other controversial positions as possible. But increasingly over the years, and especially in this latest book, he appreciates and commits himself to the interconnectedness of issues. Perhaps the single most central and important claim in his recent book is that one can't take stands in philosophy of mind without taking stands on a whole host of other issues, including fundamental issues in epistemology. In a memorable phrase, he observes that there is no "epistemological Switzerland in the war between dualists and physicalists." (*Dualism*, 91).

Here is an early passage in the book where he emphasizes this interconnectedness:

"One cannot coherently address problems in the philosophy of mind without working through issues in epistemology, philosophy of language, and broader metaphysical issues concerning the existence and nature of truth, states of affairs, facts, events, properties, substances, and identity, both at a time and through time. Lurking in the background are critical metaphilosophical issues concerning the nature and appropriate methods of philosophical inquiry." (*Dualism*, 1-2)

Richard takes his own advice seriously. He takes stands on all the above issues. The result is a genuine philosophical system. As I say, this is rare in contemporary philosophy. Very rare.

The final characteristic I want to mention is Richard's commitment to the independence of philosophy and its issues, which again is unusual in our era.

Richard argues in *Dualism* that if you look to science for solutions to issues in the philosophy of mind, this only shows you are not focusing on the most fundamental issues. On the fundamental issues, science is not in a position to provide answers.

What are some of these distinctively philosophical questions that cannot be settled by science? Here are a few that Richard lists: Are knowledge arguments for dualism sound? What is the difference between a mental property and a physical property? Is functionalism a plausible account of the nature of mental states? How do we fix the reference of predicate expressions for mental states? (*Dualism*, 138-139).

There are, moreover, analogous fundamental questions in other areas of philosophy, which Richard also insists can only be addressed through doing philosophy. Hence, the primacy of philosophy.

For all these reasons, Richard is one of most distinctive voices in all of contemporary philosophy. The philosophical community in general has many reasons to be grateful to him, but to return to the point with which I began, I'm also personally grateful. Grateful for all he's done for philosophy but even more for his friendship over the years.

Many of the people at this workshop feel exactly the same. They feel the same gratitude to Richard. As they and his other colleagues and students over the years will attest, there are qualities of Richard as a person that go far beyond those of his work and are treasured by pretty much everyone who has ever worked with him.

Chief among these are loyalty to his friends, colleagues, and students, and although he will hate my saying it, since he likes to present himself as a bit of a cynic (although the rest of us know better) the immense personal integrity that he brings to everything he does. But another of Richard's qualities, one I mentioned at the very beginning and that he perhaps won't mind my mentioning as much, is that he is just so much fun to be around and do philosophy with.