

Epistemology from a Global Perspective

Mizumoto, M., Stich, S. P., & McCready, E.: *Epistemology for the Rest of the World*, 2018, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 320 pp., ISBN: 9780190865085, £55.00 (Hardback)

David Ludwig

Knowledge, Technology, and Innovation (KTI) Group Wageningen University Wageningen Netherlands

Epistemology for the Rest of the World is a book with a mission. As Stich and Mizumoto emphasize in the opening manifesto of the volume, epistemologists commonly rely on features “of ‘our language’ and ‘our language’ was almost always English” (ix). From a methodological perspective, this narrow focus on English raises important questions about the prospects of doing epistemology through the contingent lens of one particular language. Both the title of the volume and the manifesto express the ambition to broaden the linguistic lens of epistemology and thereby contribute to a debate that more adequately reflects the concerns of the “rest of the world”.

As Stich and Mizumoto’s manifesto acknowledges, however, the urgency of cross-linguistic research in epistemology depends on the scope of global variability of epistemological concepts and practices. If the concept *knowledge* remains stable across diverse languages, for example, it may be perfectly legitimate to focus on the English word “knowledge” while paying relatively little attention to its translations into other languages. Much of the book is structured around this question of cross-linguistic stability that is formulated in terms of a “*universality thesis*, which claims that the properties of the English word ‘know’, English sentences like ‘S knows that p’, and related locutions that have been studied by Anglophone epistemologists are shared by the standard translations of these expressions in most or all languages” (ix). If the universality thesis is wrong, mainstream epistemology is in deep trouble and needs to dramatically rethink its relations to the “rest of the world”. If the universality thesis is true, the situation is much less dramatic and epistemological research in English could hope to lead to a genuinely global epistemology.

While the manifesto and introduction frame the volume in terms of the universality thesis, the following 12 chapters do not always put universality at the centre but discuss a fascinating array of issues from epistemic core concepts of Sanskrit (chapter 1) to the primate social cognition (chapter 12). Still, most chapters relate to the universality thesis in some way and provide impressive demonstration of the empirical and intellectual maturity of cross-culturally oriented epistemology. Chapters 1–5 develop in-depth analyses of epistemic core concepts in Sanskrit (*jñāna* and *pramā*), Japanese (*shiru*, *wakaru*), Chinese (*renshi*, *zhidao*, and *liaojie*). Chapters 6–9 follow up on these geographically located case studies with

more comparative and cross-linguistic data such as Machery et al.'s work on Gettier cases in Brazil, India, Japan, and USA (chapter 6) or Wierzbicka's case for *know* as a universal human concept on the basis of data from cross-linguistic semantics (chapter 9). Finally, chapters 10–12 add wider methodological considerations from Hazlett's case for epistemology that is largely independent from comparative linguistics (chapter 10) to Tsai and Lien's reflections on the methodology of testing the universality thesis (chapter 11) and Turri's discussion of psychological evidence across primate species (chapter 12).

The contributions of the volume do not converge on one position regarding the universality thesis. Stich and Mizumoto's manifesto therefore remains humble in emphasizing that “we really don't know” (xii) whether the universality thesis is true. This modest conclusion, however, also reflects a core strength of the book that takes the complexity of empirical data seriously rather than building sweeping philosophical claims on partial evidence. In this sense, the volume also demonstrates the remarkable progress of empirically informed epistemology that has emerged from experimental philosophy and other interactions with the cognitive sciences. Contested and unsettled claims of universality are not unique to epistemology but widely reflected in fields that navigate ambitious universalist claims of the cognitive revolution and increased reflectivity about data that are heavily skewed towards WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) samples of North-American college students (Henrich et al. 2010, *The weirdest people in the world*, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*). The lack of a straightforward answer to the universality thesis is therefore not a flaw of the book but rather illustrates its grounding in the current state of empirical debate.

Epistemology for the Rest of the World is an impressive book that sets an important agenda for empirically and globally oriented epistemology. At the same time, the title of the book also illustrates that mainstream epistemology still has a long way to go to connect with epistemic practices and concerns beyond Anglophone academia. The promise of an “Epistemology for the Rest of the World” brings up associations with other programs that have largely developed outside of the mainstream of academic philosophy such as Boaventura de Sousa Santos' influential program of “Epistemologies of the South” (e.g. 2015. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against epistemicide*. Routledge). De Sousa Santos' program has been successful beyond narrow philosophical debates because it explores the relevance of epistemological issues for the “Global South”. For example: How do different “styles of thought” relate to different sociocultural contexts beyond Europe and North America? How do heterogenous epistemic traditions relate to issues such as intercultural education or legal pluralism or international development? How does global epistemic diversity contribute to the livelihoods of local communities beyond Western industrialized countries? How are the epistemic and political dominance of the West related? What would it mean to strive for global epistemic justice and to transform agendas of epistemology through concerns of the “rest of the world”?

Neither the manifesto nor the introduction connects to these kinds of questions. By framing the book almost exclusively in terms of the universality thesis, the editors circumvent engagement with practical or even political questions about the relevance of epistemology for the rest of the world. As a result, it remains unclear whether the volume actually provides an epistemology for the rest of the world. Instead, the rest of the world seems largely confined to providing data for epistemologists. Furthermore, the editors structure the rich empirical material of the chapters through a narrow lens that focuses on counterparts of the English word “knowledge”. This narrow lens is useful for testing the universality thesis but also means that the data are almost exclusively discussed against the background of epistemological concerns in Anglophone academia, such as universalist ambitions of cognitive scientists and philosophers. The universality thesis is intriguing but the framing remains very far from including the “rest of the world” in setting agendas of epistemological inquiry.

The lack of deeper engagement with the concerns of the “rest of the world” does not invalidate the many merits of the book. The volume does a wonderful job in achieving its main goal of assessing the state of the universality thesis. However, the discrepancy between the title and the content of the book illustrates that mainstream epistemology still has a long way to go if it wants to move from cross-linguistic comparison of **the concept of** knowledge to a meaningful dialogue with the “rest of the world” about epistemological agendas and practices. This does not mean that the universality thesis has no role in this dialogue. Cross-cultural stability of core concepts like *knowledge* can provide common ground for intercultural dialogue just as cross-cultural divergence plays a crucial role for questions of epistemic justice and epistemic self-determination. Furthermore, many of the individual chapters of the book contain insights beyond the universality thesis in the narrow sense. For example, Ganeri’s “Epistemology from a Sanskritic Point of View” (chapter 1) does not only include a critical discussion of universality but also builds a much broader frame for understanding “how epistemology is done in languages other than English” (20). In this sense, *Epistemology for the Rest of the World* can also be read as a starting point for taking philosophy further towards an intercultural dialogue about research agendas, methods and priorities in epistemology