

Evolutionary Epistemology: Its Aspirations and Limits.

Anthony O'Hear (University of Buckingham)

Abstract

Modern epistemology (that of Descartes and the empiricists) attempts to answer the question as to how the individual mind can know anything external to itself.

Evolutionary epistemology (EE) deflects the question at the outset. The mind knows the world because the mind has been formed by nature (or the world) in our struggle to survive and reproduce in the world. Putting it anthropomorphically, the mind has been formed by nature to know nature. There is no bridge to cross between us and the external world.

This answer promotes interesting explorations of the ways our minds and sense organs latch on to various natural regularities and exploit these coincidences. Its picture of the mind as part of our activity in a world which has played its role in forming it has more phenomenological plausibility than the standpoint of modern epistemology.

But its naturalistic stance also suggests limitations in our knowledge, both in terms of knowable subject matter and in terms of the aims we might have in investigating the world.

This latter point recalls the ancient dispute between Aristotelians and English utilitarians on the aims of knowledge.

And the stance of EE generally recalls the approach of Aquinas (and more remotely of Aristotle) to knowledge, whereby the mind is in a certain sense identical to what it knows and, in perception and knowledge, has imprinted on it that which it has been created to know.

For Aquinas the underlying presumption is that the mind and the world are both created by God, hence mutually harmonious.

EE explains the pre-established harmony between mind and nature naturalistically. But whereas for Aquinas *anima est quodammodo omnia*, is it the case that for EE the mind 'is' only what is relevant to survival and reproduction?