Assurance: An Austinian View of Knowledge and Knowledge Claims. By KRISTA LAWLOR. (Oxford:

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Krista Lawlor's book has an impressive scope. In it she develops an Austinian view of knowledge

and knowledge claims. But she also defends original views about the nature of and norms governing

declarative speech acts, the mechanics of context-sensitivity and the problem of scepticism. While

her interests are more systematic than exegetical, she gives us a nuanced and sympathetic reading of

Austin. In my view, she succeeds in showing that the Austinian has something to offer all these

debates.

There are two centrepieces of Lawlor's Austinian view. The first is her claim that knowledge

claims are the usual means by which speakers provide *assurance* (Ch. 1). By this Lawlor means that

knowledge claims are the usual means of performing the speech-act of assuring (compare: saying "I

promise" is the usual way to perform the speech-act of promising). For instance, if I say "I know my

phone is working again", I assure my audience that my phone is working again. Lawlor distinguishes

between assuring one's audience that p and *asserting* that p to one's audience. In asserting that p to

one's audience one commits oneself to p being true, but one does not commit oneself to having

what Lawlor calls 'conclusive reasons' (roughly, reasons that would satisfy any reasonable person). In

assuring one's audience that p, one commits oneself to having conclusive reasons, as well as to p

being true.

I want to raise two points here. First, Lawlor nicely compares her view with the view that

knowledge is the norm of assertion (pp. 48-52). But one might wonder how Lawlor's view of

assurance compares with other views about assertion. Consider a Brandomian account, on which to

assert that p is to commit to defending p when appropriately challenged. This doesn't sound so

different to Lawlor's account of assurance; defending one's assertion when appropriately challenged requires having reasons that answer appropriate challenges. So perhaps the difference between assertion and assurance is less stark than Lawlor thinks.

Second, Lawlor holds that assurance is *usually* provided by knowledge claims, not that all and only knowledge claims provide assurance, and that her Austinian account of knowledge and knowledge claims provides the *best explanation* of the connection between knowledge and assurance. She does not commit the 'speech-act fallacy' of 'reading off' the meaning of "knows" from the speech-act of assurance (p. 42). But one might still have a methodological worry. Lawlor's argument for her Austinian account of knowledge and knowledge claims is based on its ability to explain the connection between knowledge and assurance. But what about other functional and theoretical roles that knowledge and knowledge claims seem to play – for instance, the connections between knowledge, evidence, assertion, practical reasoning and belief emphasised by knowledge-first epistemology? Lawlor engages with these connections only insofar as they pose problems for her Austinian account. This prompts a question: if we were to take these other connections as our starting point, would we still end up with Lawlor's Austinian account?

The second centrepiece is a reasonable alternatives account of knowledge: a subject S knows some proposition *p* iff she is able to rule out all reasonable alternatives to *p* (Ch. 2, Ch. 5). The second centrepiece is closely connected to the first. Assurance requires having conclusive reasons, and knowledge requires being able to rule out reasonable alternatives. Lawlor concludes that assurance requires knowledge, because one has conclusive reasons if one is able to rule out all reasonable alternatives (p. 47).

Lawlor defends a contextualist version of the reasonable alternatives account, on which different sets of alternatives are reasonable in different contexts of utterance (Ch. 2). But her

contextualist view differs from the usual contextualist view in that she denies that the word "knows" is analogous to indexical expressions. While others have defended 'non-semantic' contextualisms, Lawlor's version differs from these views too, in that she embeds it within an Austinian semantic framework. Roughly, the idea is that statements are true iff their 'descriptive contents' (essentially a structured Russellian proposition) are true of the 'demonstrated situation' (the situation that the claim is made about). So, for instance, if I say "I know this fish is a chain pickerel", I express the Russellian proposition <Robin, knows, fish is a chain pickerel>, which is true iff it is true of the situation I made the claim about. Lawlor characterises situations in terms of *alternatives*, where the alternatives in a situation are features of the *conversational context*. For instance, imagine in my context we are considering three alternatives: that the fish is a trout, perch or bass. My knowledge claim is true so long as I can rule out all of these alternatives.

The standard worry about appealing to relevant or reasonable alternatives is that it is hard to give an informative account of which alternatives are relevant. The contextualist aspect of Lawlor's view helps a little with this worry. While there is no acontextual account of reasonableness, the conversational participants in a given conversational context can still manage to agree on which alternatives are reasonable. But (correctly) Lawlor doesn't think that an alternative is reasonable or unreasonable just in case the conversational participants consider it such (pp. 185-8). Her central idea is that a reasonable alternative is an alternative that a *reasonable person* would consider (Ch. 5). A reasonable person is (very roughly) someone who: (i) is of normal mental capacity (ii) has normal world knowledge (iii) has a capacity for impartial evaluation of the costs and benefits of belief and absence of belief (iv) has the speaker's interests. Because the reasonableness of an alternative is tied to what a reasonable person *with the speaker's interests* would consider reasonable, this account is still

contextualist; reasonableness will vary with the speaker's interests. But it puts strong constraints on the variation of reasonableness with context.

One might complain that we have replaced one notion (that of a reasonable alternative) with another (that of a reasonable person) that is no more amenable to detailed analysis. Lawlor's response is that the notion of a reasonable person is familiar from the law (pp. 153-4). If any lack of clarity is no barrier to actual practical application, it should be no barrier to appealing to the notion in epistemology. But perhaps another response is available. Virtue theorists think we can get purchase on moral notions by considering what a virtuous person would do. Similarly, Lawlor thinks we can get purchase on reasonableness by considering what a reasonable person would consider reasonable. Maybe virtue theory is uninformative too, but making this charge stick requires some serious work.

There are other valuable ideas in the book that merit further discussion (e.g. Lawlor's account of conversational scoreboards in Ch. 2 and Ch. 5, her discussion of closure in Ch. 4 and scepticism in Ch. 6), but I want to finish by adverting to another one of its virtues. Many books in contemporary epistemology assume a high level of familiarity with the relevant views and issues. While this may gratify the experts, it makes it hard for the non-experts to join the discussion. Lawlor's doesn't. She guides the reader through thorny issues without assuming much more than passing familiarity with the relevant debates. Moreover, she does this while developing a sustained argument for her own Austinian view. I recommend this book to both experts and those who are just intrigued to see what an Austinian view of knowledge and knowledge claims might look like.

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