ON THE ROLES OF TRUSTWORTHINESS AND ACCEPTANCE

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Our trust in our own trustworthiness as evaluators of truth plays a uniquely important role in Lehrer’s recent work in epistemology (see Lehrer 1989; 1989a; 1990, ch. 6). Lehrer has claimed that a person who trusts in her own trustworthiness has a reason for accepting everything she accepts, including that she is trustworthy. I doubt that trust in our trustworthiness can play the epistemic role Lehrer wants to assign to it. Lehrer’s original claim is, I think, much too bold. A suitably revised version of the claim does not succeed in assigning any important epistemic role to our own trustworthiness as evaluators of truth.

1. What is it to trust in one’s own trustworthiness? According to Lehrer (1989, p. 143), it is to accept the proposition expressed by:

T: I am a trustworthy evaluator of truth.

At another place (1990, p. 122), Lehrer offers a somewhat different formulation, viz.: “Whatever I accept with the objective of accepting something just in case it is true, I accept in a trustworthy manner”. It is safe to assume that the two formulations are alternative ways of expressing the same proposition. I mention the latter formulation because it may help to clarify the former. Some more clarification as to exactly what proposition is expressed by T may eventually be required. But for the time being I will not engage in further analysis of the meaning of T. Instead, I wish to discuss the role T is supposed to play within Lehrer’s epistemology.¹

¹ One point about the interpretation of T should be made to prevent misunderstanding. It is probably incorrect to speak generally of the proposition expres-
Lehrer assigns a very special epistemic role to T; a role not shared by any other proposition: "The consequence of adding principle (T) to my acceptance system is that whatever I accept is more reasonable for me to accept than its denial" (1990, p. 122; cf. 1989, p. 143). In making this claim about the role of T, Lehrer proposes what is, in effect, a substantial epistemic principle. He does not give the principle a name of its own nor does he highlight it by making it stand out from the surrounding text. But it certainly deserves to be singled out in this manner. So let us call it principle (R). Within the framework of Lehrer’s epistemology, (R) has to be expressed in the following way:

(R) For any p, if S accepts T and S accepts p, then it is more reasonable for S to accept p than to accept the denial of p on the basis of S’s acceptance system.

Lehrer (1989, pp. 143f.; 1990, pp. 122f.) emphasizes one particularly interesting instance of (R); an instance which he does single out as an “official” principle (1989, p. 144):

(TR) If S accepts T, then it is more reasonable for S to accept T than to accept the denial of T on the basis of S’s acceptance system.

Principle (TR) is of course intriguing. It invites one to think about circularity, epistemic regress and the question whether the coherentist Lehrer takes T to be “basic” in the sense usually associated with foundationalism. Even though principle (TR) would certainly make

2. Lehrer discusses these issues. In (1989, pp. 145f.) he argues that, insofar as (TR) is circular or regressive, the circularity or regressiveness involved is not epistemically vicious. In (1990, pp. 123f.) he points out that (TR) does not imply that T is basic in the sense required for traditional foundationalism. That is, (TR) does not imply that T justifies itself. The epistemic status that T confers on itself, according to (TR), is lower than the status required for justification.