EPISTEMOLOGY is a good word. One can work it into the conversation at a cocktail party and impress people (at least some people). It's also the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations. This is the core of Hunter Lewis' book on values - or more accurately the differing cognitive styles with which we view the world. Little is mentioned about Hunter Lewis except that he is a writer and has published in numerous well-known magazines and newspapers. Lewis has identified six basic ways we come to "know" something. The first four are: sensory experience, deductive logic, emotions, and intuitions. In addition, he posits two other synthetic mental modes, authority and "science." Lewis devotes much of the book to each of these six modes and presents each with historical examples. For sensory experience, the model is Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). Montaigne, the French Renaissance thinker and skeptic, was the very epitomy of openness to pleasure and tolerance, and of the avoidance of pride, pretense, formality, dishonesty, and even hard work. As models for the logical point of view, Lewis offers the philosophers Baruch de Spinoza (1632-1677) and Mortimer Adler (1902-2001). For the emotional perspective, his example is Obie Wan Kenobie (Star Wars), who counsels Luke Skywalker and all of us to "trust your feelings." For intuition, his model is in the meditative style of Darshan Singh, a teacher whose mission is in New Delhi, India. The value system based on authority, the one described most critically by the author, is exemplified by Protestant fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is contrasted with Roman Catholicism and the Catholic claims that Protestantism embraces three heresies - modernism, capitalism, and nationalism. The section on values based on "science" is the most comprehensive with much space devoted to Freudian psychology, especially the defense mechanisms as elaborated by psychiatrist George Vaillant. Lewis concludes that defenses are both narrowly "scientific" and a value system. There is also an analysis of cognitive psychology, behaviorism, and sociobiology. The author correctly points out that each of these fields has underlying assumptions which are ironically close to the authoritarian mode. Further chapters expand on the complex system of beliefs and detail the lives of Barth, Einstein, and Ghandi. A section on the historical periods of values indicates that the scientific mode is primary currently, but with the rise of fundamentalism throughout the world, it is in competition with authority. The final section focuses on specific systems such as the political, economic, philosophical value systems, and literary criticism.

After reflecting on the book, I found it intellectually satisfying and possibly overly ambitious. It requires thought and possibly an analytic mind to question the source of most statements. The subtitle, Personal Choices That Shape Our Lives implies that this is some sort of self-help book. It is not. Instead it is an analysis of why we humans cannot agree on many basic issues - religion, ethical questions, politics, etc. Lewis concludes our disagreements are based in our differing cognitive styles and values, and these differences totally color our approaches and reactions to the world around us. Understanding why we disagree is a small step toward achieving mutual respect and tolerance.