

Epistemology: Living Philosophy in Contemporary Times

WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

WHAT MAKES FOR KNOWLEDGE?

8 December 2019 at Carindale Library Meeting Room

After making up our mind on whether the centre of the universe to worlds beyond is something good, or some other value to us, we have already made the second response of asking ourselves whether we do know such things, whether is it true, whether it ought to be believed, and why?

THE ESSAY

(The works listed are not a complete coverage of the contemporary field but to provide the best known and most significant in contemporary discussions. Apologies if anything important has been missed)

This essay will be shorter than the other essays. It is not due to the range of ideas in contemporary epistemology, as it is rather wide, but rather that the field is very complex to the point that some philosophers see no point in the field at all, and they believe we should abandon any attempt at theories of knowledge. In the Introduction I offer a few texts which pull together this main conversation of epistemology or of its overthrow. However, there are also new perspectives in traditional epistemic arguments. I'll briefly describe these works, which will allow the reader the space to digest some very tough fibre of thought, if not what we take as knowledge.

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INTRODUCTION

A first introduction, one that has become traditional in the field is Edmund Gettier's 1963 essay, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" (*Analysis*, Vol. 23, No. 6, June 1963). The Gettier problem is a landmark philosophical problem concerning our understanding of descriptive knowledge. It is, for some, the point of collapse for traditional epistemology, for others it became the new challenge. Gettier-type counterexamples (called "Gettier-cases") challenge the long-held justified true belief (JTB) account of knowledge. The JTB account holds that knowledge is equivalent to justified true belief; if all three conditions (justification, truth, and belief) are met of a given claim, then we have knowledge of that claim. Gettier offered two counterexamples that there are cases where individuals can have a justified, true belief regarding a claim but still fail to know it because the reasons for the belief, while justified, turn out to be false. Thus, Gettier claims to have shown that the JTB account is inadequate; that it does not account for all of the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge.

That is the usual introduction. However, one key text is the best work on contemporary epistemology to show how we got to the current state of play, similarly to the way that Bernard Williams's major work on ethics and its history demonstrated the limits of that field (mentioned in the previous essay). Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1979) is a long philosophical history which explains why we should abandon theories of knowledge. It is a major critique of modern philosophy, and was the epistemic landmark to postmodernism. However, it was **not** at all the direction of the French deconstructionists or the late poststructuralists. Rather Rorty turns to the set of tools from American pragmatism (William James, but particularly John Dewey), the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, the philosophy of language in Ludwig Wittgenstein, but more significantly from the post-positivist philosophy in the philosophy of mind and logic from Wilfred Sellars and W.V.O. Quine. Rorty presents a very convincing critique of both Kantian and Cartesian models of thought which argues for knowledge in externality being represented in a concept of the mind. To put it too simply, Rorty shows that this pre-20th century concept of the mind (and ending in the defeat of 19th century Hegelian idealism) is untenable in an explanation of knowledge. In rejecting the traditional concept of the mind, the enterprise of modern epistemology collapses. An important adjunct idea here is that the whole of philosophy does not have much to say to guide culture in what is knowledge. Rorty's solution is that we should forget theories of knowledge, and just converse with one another to arrive at negotiated understanding. More troubling, Rorty does not think it is important to have a clear concept or theory of truth, to be able to say how we *know* the *truth* (Rorty died before Donald Trump entered politics).

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As we have seen, in the past essays, Kantian or Cartesian philosophies did not come to grinding halt at Rorty's postmodern revolution. "The King is Dead, Long Live the King". Tyler Burge's essay, "Individualism and Self-Knowledge" (*The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 85, No. 11, November 1988), discussed the juxtaposition of a restricted Cartesian conception of knowledge of one's own thoughts and a nonindividualistic conception of the individuation of thoughts. Both conceptions are complex and controversial, but Burge is not troubled by Rorty's argument. Nevertheless, Rorty's exceptionally well-argued thesis did require a response from among the defenders of epistemology. It came from Susan Haack's *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1993). Haack develops an original theory of empirical evidence or justification, and argues its appropriateness to the goals of inquiry. It has been named, foundherentism. It works by identifying the compatibility in the two large rival epistemic theories: foundationalism, which it holds that basic beliefs unilaterally support derived beliefs, with support always directed from the former to the latter, and coherentism which holds that beliefs mutually support each other when they belong to the same coherent belief-set. In so doing, Haack speaks to the arrange of contemporary theories – David Lewis's foundationalism; Donald Davidson's and Lawrence Bonjour's coherentism; Karl Popper's 'epistemology without a knowing subject'; Quine's naturalism; Alan S. Goldman's reliabilism; and Richard Rorty's, Stephen Stich's, and the Patricia Churchlands' obituaries of epistemology (giving way to the new 'philosophy of mind', consciousness studies). Haack's argument is a good representation of how contemporary epistemology, or its demise, has moved away from the system builders (Kant, Descartes, and Hegel) while "not throwing the baby out, with the dirty water." Rorty may have been too quick to see a collapse of the whole philosophy enterprise, but in fairness he had argued for a therapeutic role in philosophy, in the same spirit as Wittgenstein.

The critical question is whether therapy, which makes no judgement of knowledge or truth value, is sufficient. Bernard Williams is not particularly concerned about theories of knowledge in the way Susan Haack is. Williams, however, has argued for concepts of internalism in reasoning and convergence in science where the binary of subject and object, and internality and externality is very important. Furthermore, Williams is an interpreter of Nietzsche, and sought to correct the awful misunderstanding that postmodernists had in thinking that Nietzsche was a denier of truth value. The opposite is 'true'; and there are many other scholars of Nietzsche who sought to set the record correct (see Brian Leiter, *Nietzsche on Morality*, Routledge, 2002). In *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton University Press, 2002), Bernard Williams (his last book before his death) demonstrated why Rorty's therapy-only approach, with his casual take on truth value (Williams himself calls Rorty a 'truth-denier'), does not work in culture. For Williams, truth values provide the only doorway to accuracy and sympathy.

OTHER TRADITIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY CONVERSATION

Rorty could well be right that the concept of mental representation in the Kantian or Cartesian model does not work anymore with our contemporary consciousness studies. However, it would appear impossible for culture to exist without concepts of subject and object, and internality and externality. You can see a very questionable monism in deconstructivity which wishes to remove 'subjectivity' or 'externality' completely. If difference is what you want then it is impossible to throw out the binaries. However, there may be a way to find knowledge in a compatibility that provides a long spectrum within binaries which are representative. This is how I interpret Thomas Nagel's more traditional work, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford University Press, 1986). Human beings do appear to have the unique ability to view the world in a detached way: We can think about the world in terms that transcend our own experience or interest, and consider the world from a vantage point. Nagel calls this view "nowhere in particular". At the same time, each of us is a particular person in a particular place, each with his own 'personal' view of the world, a view that we can recognize as just one aspect of the whole. Nagel argues that our divided nature is the root of a whole range of philosophical problems: the mind-body problem, personal identity, knowledge and skepticism, thought and reality, free will, ethics, the relation between moral and other values, the meaning of life, and death. Excessive objectification has been a malady of modern analytic philosophy and it has led to implausible forms of reductionism in the philosophy of mind and elsewhere. The solution for Nagel is to work the two perspectives together; not to retreat into subjectivity, and not to objectify *the* experience *as it happens*. It is recognition that the human objectifying impulse is internal reasoning in the way Williams' argues.

In my view, these late twentieth century philosophical arguments comes off the rejection of behaviourist arguments in the early twentieth century, in particular from Karl Popper's 'epistemology without a knowing subject'. Ingvar Johansson tackles this problem in *A Critique of Karl Popper's Methodology* (Esselte stadium, 1975). Ignoring Rorty, contemporary epistemology has moved forward in the new perspectives. William's and Nagel's internalist theses are matches by Ernest Sosa's externalist arguments – the view that reasoning has to demonstrate externality to be considered knowledge. These are very technical arguments where Williams and Sosa have been writers in the same books and the same conference debates. Unlike Rorty's postmodernist stance (and as excellent as Rorty's argument), there is a spirit of philosophical compatibility, along Nagel's lines, between the internalists and externalists, albeit firm disagreement on where the primary of reasoning rests. In Ernest Sosa's *Knowledge in Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), there is

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a major collection of thought in contemporary epistemology: the nature of propositional knowledge; externalism versus internalism; foundationalism versus coherentism; and the problem of the criterion. Ernest Sosa in *A Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, 2007), much like Williams but with different arguments, brings ethics and epistemology together. Sosa argues for two levels of knowledge, the animal and the reflective, each viewed as a distinctive human accomplishment.

One philosopher has very much stuck with traditional epistemology with very little references to new perspectives; in fact, it is very reliant on ancient concepts where he seeks to give them new life. Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000) seeks to show that it is rational to accept Christian belief. Plantinga proposes, with what he calls 'the Aquinas/Calvin Model', an "account of the way in which Christian belief is, in fact, justified, rational and warranted". Overall, Alvin Plantinga's work is a trilogy on the notion of warrant, which he defines as that which distinguishes knowledge from true belief. In this third volume, Plantinga examines warrant's role in theistic belief, tackling the questions of whether it is rational, reasonable, justifiable, and warranted to accept Christian belief and whether there is something epistemically unacceptable in doing so. Plantinga contends that Christian beliefs are warranted to the extent that they are formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties, thus, insofar as they are warranted, Christian beliefs are knowledge if they are true.

In summary, the options in contemporary epistemology are

- Psychological Naturalism (Quine)
- Defeat or Defence of the JTB account (Gettier);
- A historicist conversation (Rorty);
- Reinterpretation of the Cartesian model (Burge) or Neo-Kantian
- Reinterpretation of Foundationalism (Lewis)
- Reinterpretation of Coherentism (Davidson, Bonjour)
- Reliablism (Goldman)
- Internal Reasoning (Williams)
- External Reasoning (Sosa)
- Juggling Object and Subject (Nagel)
- Returning to the Knowing Subject (Johansson, contra Popper)
- Traditional Christian belief as knowledge (Plantinga)

And so what do we know of contemporary epistemology?

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