

Epistemology II
Topic 5

Reminder Text

The term “epistemology” comes from the Greek words “episteme” and “logos”. “Episteme” can be translated as “knowledge” or “understanding” or “acquaintance”, while “logos” can be translated as “account” or “argument” or “reason”. Just as each of these different translations captures some facet of the meaning of these Greek terms, so too does each translation capture a different facet of epistemology itself. Although the term “epistemology” is no more than a couple of centuries old, the field of epistemology is at least as old as any in philosophy.[1] In different parts of its extensive history, different facets of epistemology have attracted attention. Plato’s epistemology was an attempt to understand what it was to know, and how knowledge (unlike mere true opinion) is good for the knower. Locke’s epistemology was an attempt to understand the operations of human understanding, Kant’s epistemology was an attempt to understand the conditions of the possibility of human understanding, and Russell’s epistemology was an attempt to understand how modern science could be justified by appeal to sensory experience. Much recent work in formal epistemology is an attempt to understand how our degrees of confidence are rationally constrained by our evidence, and much recent work in feminist epistemology is an attempt to understand the ways in which interests affect our evidence, and affect our rational constraints more generally. In all these cases, epistemology seeks to understand one or another kind of cognitive success (or, correspondingly, cognitive failure). This entry surveys the varieties of cognitive success, and some recent efforts to understand some of those varieties.

What is Knowledge?

Knowledge is among the many kinds of cognitive success that epistemology is interested in understanding. Because it has attracted vastly more attention in recent epistemology than any other variety of cognitive success, we devote the present section to considering it in some detail. But the English word “knowledge” lumps together various states that are distinguished in other languages: for instance, the verb “to know” can be translated into French either as “connaitre” or as “savoir”, and the noun “knowledge” can be translated into Latin as either “cognitio” or as “scientia”. Exactly how to individuate the various kinds of cognitive success is not something that can be determined solely by appeal to the lexicon of any particular natural language. The present section provides a brief survey of some of the kinds of cognitive success that are indicated by the use of “knowledge” in English, but this is not intended to signal that these kinds of cognitive success are all species of some common genus. Neither, however, is it intended to signal that these kinds of cognitive success are not all species of some common genus: at least some philosophers have taken there to be a genus, awareness, of which the various kinds of knowledge are all species, and with respect to which these various kinds may all be explained (see Silva 2019 for a defense of “awareness first” epistemology).

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Knowing Individuals

Even if you know many facts about Napoleon, it doesn't follow that you know Napoleon. You couldn't ever have known Napoleon, since he died long before you were born. But, despite not having ever known Napoleon, you could still know a great many facts about Napoleon—perhaps you know even more facts about Napoleon than did those who knew him most intimately. This shows that knowing a person is not the same as knowing a great many facts about the person: the latter is not sufficient for the former. And perhaps the former is not even sufficient for the latter, since I might know my next door neighbor, and yet not realize that he is an undercover agent, and that almost everything he tells me about himself is false.

Knowing a person is a matter of being acquainted with that person, and acquaintance involves some kind of perceptual relation to the person. What kind of perceptual relation? Clearly, not just any perceptual relation will do: I see and hear thousands of people while walking around a bustling city, but it doesn't follow that I am acquainted with any of them. Must acquaintance involve an ability to distinguish that individual from others? It depends upon what such an ability amounts to. I am acquainted with my next door neighbor, even though, in some sense, I cannot distinguish him from his identical twin: if they were together I couldn't tell who was who.

Just as we can be acquainted with a person, so too can we be acquainted with a city, a species of bird, a planet, 1960s jazz music, Watson and Crick's research, transphobia, and so on. If it's not clear precisely what acquaintance demands in the case of people, it's even less clear what it demands across all of these various cases. If there is a genus of cognitive success expressed by the verb "to know" with a direct object, or by the French "connaitre", we have not yet understood that genus.

Knowing How

In his groundbreaking book, *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle argued that knowing how to do something must be different from knowing any set of facts. No matter how many facts you might know about swimming, say, it doesn't follow from your knowledge of these facts that you know how to swim. And, of course, you might know how to swim even without knowing very many facts about swimming. For Ryle, knowing how is fundamentally different from knowing that.

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This Rylean distinction between knowing how and knowing that has been prominently challenged, beginning in 1975 with the publication of Carl Ginet's *Knowledge, Perception, and Memory*. Ginet argued that knowing how to do something was simply knowing that a particular act was a way to do that thing. This challenge was extended and systematized by Boër and Lycan (1975), who argued that knowing who, knowing which, knowing why, knowing where, knowing when, and knowing how—all of the varieties of knowing *wh-*, as they called it—were all just different forms of knowing that. To know who is F, for instance, was simply to know that a particular person is F. To know why p is simply to know that a particular thing is the reason why p. And to know how to F was simply to know that a particular act is a way to F. This view was elaborated in considerable detail by Stanley and Williamson 2001, and then challenged or refined by many subsequent writers (see, for instance, the essays in Bengson and Moffett 2011, and also Pavese 2015 and 2017).

Knowing Facts

Whenever a knower (S) knows some fact (p), several conditions must obtain. A proposition that S doesn't even believe cannot be, or express, a fact that S knows. Therefore, knowledge requires belief.[14] False propositions cannot be, or express, facts, and so cannot be known. Therefore, knowledge requires truth. Finally, S's being correct in believing that p might merely be a matter of luck. For example, if Hal believes he has a fatal illness, not because he was told so by his doctor, but solely because as a hypochondriac he can't help believing it, and it turns out that in fact he has a fatal illness, Hal's being right about this is merely accidental: a matter of luck (bad luck, in this case).[15] Therefore, knowledge requires a third element, one that excludes the aforementioned luck, and so that involves S's belief being, in some sense, justifiably or appropriately held. If we take these three conditions on knowledge to be not merely necessary but also sufficient, then: S knows that p if and only if p is true and S justifiably believes that p. According to this account, the three conditions—truth, belief, and justification—are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for knowledge of facts.[16]

Recall that the justification condition is introduced to ensure that S's belief is not true merely because of luck. But what must justification be, if it can ensure that? It may be thought that S's belief that p is true not merely because of luck when it is reasonable or rational, from S's own point of view, to take p to be true. Or it may be thought that S's belief is true not merely because of luck if that belief has a high objective probability of truth, that is, if it is formed or sustained by reliable cognitive processes or faculties. But, as we will see in the next section, if justification is understood in either of these ways, it cannot ensure against luck.

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It turns out, as Edmund Gettier showed, that there are cases of JTB that are not cases of knowledge. JTB, therefore, is not sufficient for knowledge. Cases like that—known as Gettier cases[17]—arise because neither the possession of adequate evidence, nor origination in reliable faculties, nor the conjunction of these conditions, is sufficient for ensuring that a belief is not true merely because of luck. Consider the well-known case of barn-facades: Henry drives through a rural area in which what appear to be barns are, with the exception of just one, mere barn facades. From the road Henry is driving on, these facades look exactly like real barns. Henry happens to be looking at the one and only real barn in the area and believes that there's a barn over there. So Henry's belief is true, and furthermore his visual experience makes it reasonable, from his point of view, to hold that belief. Finally, his belief originates in a reliable cognitive process: normal vision of ordinary, recognizable objects in good lighting. Yet Henry's belief is true in this case merely because of luck: had Henry noticed one of the barn-facades instead, his belief would have been false. There is, therefore, broad agreement among epistemologists that Henry's belief does not qualify as knowledge.[18]

To state conditions that are jointly sufficient for knowledge, what further element must be added to JTB? This is known as the Gettier problem. Some philosophers attempt to solve the Gettier problem by adding a fourth condition to the three conditions mentioned above, while others attempt to solve it by either replacing or refining the justification condition. How we understand the contrast between replacing the justification condition and refining it depends, of course, on how we understand the justification condition itself, which is the topic of the next section.

Some philosophers reject the Gettier problem altogether: they reject the aspiration to understand knowledge by trying to add to JTB. Some such philosophers try to explain knowledge in terms of virtues: they say that to know a fact is for the truth of one's belief to manifest epistemic virtue (see Zagzebski 1996 and Sosa 1997). Other such philosophers try to explain knowledge by identifying it as a genus of many familiar species: they say that knowledge is the most general factive mental state operator (see Williamson 2002). And still other such philosophers try to explain knowledge by explaining its distinctive role in some other activity. According to some, to know a fact is for that fact to be a reason for which one can do or think something.[19] According to others, to know a fact is to be entitled to assert that fact (see Unger 1975, Williamson 2002, DeRose 2002 for defenses of this view; see Brown 2008b and 2010 for dissent). According to still others, to know a fact is to be entitled to use it as a premise in reasoning (see Hawthorne & Stanley 2008 for defense of this view; see Neta 2009 and Brown 2008a for dissent). And according to still others, to know a fact is to be a trustworthy informant concerning whether that fact obtains. Finally, there are those who think that the question "what is it to know a fact?" is misconceived: the verb "to know" does not do the work of denoting anything, but does

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a different kind of work altogether, for instance, the work of assuring one's listeners concerning some fact or other, or the work of indicating to one's audience that a particular person is a trustworthy informant concerning some matter (see Lawlor 2013 for an articulation of the assurance view, and Craig 1990 for an articulation of the trustworthy informant view).

Source: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/>

[You can see the references in the text from the relevant web page.]