

Introduction to the Book:

What Is Epistemology?

Brian C. Barnett

Part I – Traditional Epistemology: Chapters 1–4

Epistemology—as traditionally construed—is the study of knowledge. Its name derives from the Greek *epistēmê*, which translates as “knowledge” or “understanding.” This study includes four main questions:

- The What-Is-It Question: What *is* knowledge?
- The Justification Question: What makes a belief reasonable or rational or *justified*?
- The Source Question: What are the ultimate sources of knowledge (or justification)?
- The Scope Question: What, if anything, do (or can) we know?

Part I of this volume covers each question in turn. In Chapter 1, Brian C. Barnett addresses the What-Is-It Question, beginning with Plato’s view that knowledge is “justified true belief” (to phrase it in standard modern terms). A justified belief is a belief backed by good reasons. More specifically, knowledge requires reasons that are indicative of the truth, as opposed to practical, aesthetic, or moral reasons. Truth-directed reasons (and the kind of justification they supply) are **epistemic**, meaning that they pertain to knowledge. Epistemic justification receives special attention in epistemology, in part because it is the component of knowledge unique to the field. In contrast, truth and belief are topics shared by other philosophical domains (truth in logic and the philosophy of language, and belief in the philosophy of mind).

The What-Is-It Question thus leads directly to the Justification Question. In Chapter 2, Todd R. Long theorizes about epistemic justification, including “internalist” theories (in which justification is determined solely by factors internal to the mind) and “externalist” theories (which admit factors external to the mind). Internalists and externalists alike typically recognize both reason and experience as justificatory sources. But can all justification ultimately be traced to one fundamental source?

The Source Question dominated much of early modern British philosophy. In Chapter 3, K. S. Sangeetha referees the classic dispute between “empiricists” (who take experience to be primary) and “rationalists” (who posit an innate rational capacity prior to experience) that culminated in Immanuel Kant’s synthesis of the two positions. Debates over the interpretation and success of Kant’s view triggered the (in)famous analytic-continental split in philosophy.¹ These debates were also partly responsible for reinvigorating the ancient position of “skepticism,” or, significant doubt about our capacity for knowledge (or justification). This takes us to the Scope Question.

Skepticism comes in a variety of forms, ranging from “domain-specific skepticism” (doubts about, for example, religious or moral knowledge) to “global skepticism” (the view that we know nothing at all). In

*Epistemology! “What can I know?”
And why does it matter and how does it go?
This stuff is important for one cannot travel
The road of the wise if one can’t unravel
The true from the false, the sense from the babble
The solid and firm from the dribble and drabble. (xxi)*

~ Jacob M. Held

“Unsettled Meddling: An Introduction in Verse”
In *Dr. Seuss and Philosophy: Oh, the Thinks You Can Think!*

Chapter 4, Daniel Massey spotlights an influential intermediate form: skepticism about a mind-independent world. After explaining the most popular argument for this “external-world skepticism” (owing to René Descartes), Massey assesses two prominent strategies for being skeptical about such skepticism.

Part II – Expanded Epistemology: Chapters 5–8

A familiar fact about philosophy is that answers tend to generate further questions. Traditional epistemology is no exception. New puzzles emerged directly from the traditional project. New questions also arose when connections were established between epistemology and other areas of thought (both inside and outside of philosophy). Moreover, some epistemologists grew dissatisfied with traditional assumptions and priorities. These developments did not displace traditional epistemology as much as expand it. Part II of the volume is devoted to this expanded epistemology.

The traditional boundaries of epistemology were stretched in several new directions or “turns.” A “turn,” in the intended sense, is a major shift in the focus of an academic discipline to a new or previously underappreciated approach or topic. Turns need not occur in distinct historical succession, and they are not necessarily discipline-wide, but they are significant enough to have lasting impact. The **value turn** in epistemology revived Plato’s original motivation for pursuing the What-Is-It Question: to explain why knowledge is valuable.² The expanded goal is to explain “epistemic value” generally (including the value of truth, justification, inquiry, and intellectual virtue). A full account of epistemic value must address the relationship between it and value in other domains (e.g., practical, aesthetic, and moral). The value turn thus brought epistemology and ethics into close dialogue and instigated the debate over the “ethics of belief.” Guy Axtell navigates these normative issues in Chapter 5.

While some seek to connect epistemology with ethics, others prefer to make epistemology more rigorous by importing “formal” methods from linguistics, logic, and mathematics. An important development in this **formal turn** linked justification with the degree to which one’s belief is made probable by the evidence, which can be modeled by formulae (e.g., Bayes’s theorem) in the mathematical theory of probability. Applying this idea to empirical hypothesis testing results in a theory of scientific confirmation, which can be utilized in the philosophy of science. Jonathan Lopez “formalizes” epistemology and examines its scientific application in Chapter 6.

Formal and value-driven epistemology initially inherited from traditional epistemology its focus on individuals considered in the abstract. This idealization ignores that people are epistemically affected by their social situatedness. We exchange knowledge with others, disagree with one another, and engage in collaborative inquiry and decision-making. Accounting for social dimensions yields the **social turn** in epistemology. William D. Rowley lays the foundations of “social epistemology” in Chapter 7.

In its early phases, even social epistemology ignored “epistemic standpoint”—how one’s “social location” (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, dis/ability, economic status) influences one’s perspective on the world. Standpoint is epistemically significant because it shapes experience, how one thinks, the information to which one has access, and how others judge one’s credibility. Although feminist epistemologists brought epistemic standpoint to the fore, their work can

provide a framework for epistemologies from a range of social locations. For this reason, we may take “feminist epistemologies” (plural) as representative, extending beyond feminist perspectives. Monica C. Poole concludes this volume in Chapter 8 with an introduction to feminist epistemologies broadly construed.

As epistemology expanded, real-world applications became increasingly apparent. While epistemologists historically fixated on highly theoretical questions far removed from real life, some recent work attends to everyday problems: political/religious/moral disagreement, fake news, echo chambers, discerning experts from novices, ignorance-induced discrimination, communal standards for inquiry, and more. Since applied issues are best considered together with the epistemological theories suited to address them, this **applied turn** is exemplified not in its own chapter, but via examples that occur throughout this volume.

Epistemology Reconstrued

It should be clear by now that the expanded project far outstrips the traditional one. What is epistemology, then, exactly? Unfortunately, the traditional definition remains in common usage. But should philosophers of justification, inquiry, or understanding be expelled from the epistemological community if they don’t also philosophize about knowledge per se? Surely not. Such philosophers consider themselves epistemologists, teach epistemology courses, give epistemology talks, publish in epistemology journals, and are counted as fellow epistemologists even by committed traditionalists. So, a more inclusive definition is desirable.

The key plausibly lies in the recognition that all epistemologists study subjects *pertaining* to knowledge in *some* respect or another, even if only loosely or indirectly. For example, justification is required for knowledge, the aim of inquiry is to achieve knowledge (or dispel ignorance), and intellectual virtues (e.g., understanding, curiosity, humility, and open-mindedness) facilitate inquiry. Knowledge may therefore continue to serve as the touchstone for *identifying* the relevant topics, even though one needs *neither to study nor to prioritize* knowledge itself. This shift is subtle but crucial: *Epistemology began as the study of knowledge, but it has become the study of the epistemic.*³

Questions for Reflection

1. The question “Does God exist?” is *not* an epistemological question. First explain why. Then identify four related questions that *are* epistemological—one for each of traditional epistemology’s four main questions.
2. Consider two scenarios, only one of which exhibits an *epistemic* reason for belief. Which one and why?

Scenario A: They believe that their favorite sports team will win the game—merely because they desperately want this to happen.

Scenario B: They believe that their favorite sports team will win the game—this time because their team has a better track record than the other team.

3. Name and describe the four “turns” in the history of epistemology. How did they—both individually and collectively—transform the field?
4. In what way is the shift from the traditional to the expanded definition of epistemology “subtle”? What does the expanded definition add? Why is this “crucial”?

Glossary

The **applied turn**: The “turn,” or major shift, among many epistemologists toward an emphasis on real-world applications (e.g., in politics, education, and everyday life).

Epistêmê: The Greek word for “knowledge” or “understanding” from which the term “epistemology” derives.

Epistemic: Pertaining to knowledge.

Epistemology: The branch of philosophy traditionally defined as the study of knowledge. However, many epistemologists gradually deemphasized or abandoned the study of knowledge per se, focusing instead on other topics that nevertheless pertain to knowledge, even if only in some loose or indirect way. Expanding the traditional definition to accommodate this shift, epistemology can be understood as the study of the epistemic.

The **formal turn**: The “turn,” or major shift, among many epistemologists toward the use of “formal” methods (borrowed from linguistics, logic, and mathematics) in an effort to make the field more rigorous.

The **social turn**: The “turn,” or major shift, among many epistemologists toward an emphasis on the social dimensions of knowledge (and of the epistemic more broadly).

The **value turn**: The “turn,” or major shift, among many epistemologists toward an emphasis on the study of epistemic value and its relationship to value in other domains (e.g., practical, aesthetic, and moral).

References

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Notes

¹ See Jones (2009) for a brief but insightful overview of the analytic-continental split.

² I borrow the suggestion of a "value turn" in epistemology from Riggs (2008), which I here extend to other significant developments in epistemology.

³ For an alternative attempt to characterize what I call "expanded epistemology," see Steup and Neta (2020). On their approach, "epistemology seeks to understand one or another kind of '*cognitive success*' (or, correspondingly, '*cognitive failure*')." It would be a worthwhile exercise to compare and contrast the virtues and vices of their approach with the one offered here.