

Epistemic Evaluation

By DAVID HENDERSON & JOHN GRECO,
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What is the point of epistemic evaluation? Why do we appraise others as knowers, understanders, and so forth? Epistemology has traditionally focused on analysing the conditions under which one has knowledge, leaving aside for the most part questions about the roles played by epistemic evaluation in our lives more broadly. This fact is borne out by the so-called ‘Gettier literature’. For decades epistemologists have attempted to ferret out the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge, but few have asked *why* knowledge would have (or lack) the features suggested by conceptual analysis. Suppose, for example, that knowledge really is non-lucky justified true belief. Why would this be? What use do we have for a concept that is demarcated by those conditions? Is there something abhorrent about coming by true beliefs in a fortuitous fashion?

Epistemic Evaluation, edited by David Henderson and John Greco, foregrounds these broader questions about the role and importance of epistemic evaluation in human life. This volume explores a way of doing epistemology called ‘purposeful epistemology’. A purposeful epistemologist investigates what our epistemic concepts, norms, and practices are *for*. Beyond throwing light on the nature, value, and purpose of our epistemic concepts, norms, and practices, this approach might help us make headway on a variety of thorny philosophical issues, as I’ll describe below.

Although the name is new, the methodology is not. Purposeful epistemology is greatly indebted to Edward Craig, who took this approach in his insightful and (until recently) underappreciated book, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. In that work, Craig characterizes his method as follows:

We take some prima facie plausible hypothesis about what the concept of knowledge does for us, what its role in our life might be, and then ask what a concept having that role would be like, what conditions would govern its application. (1990: 2)

As this passage makes clear, Craig uses this methodology to investigate the concept of knowledge. *Epistemic Evaluation*, in contrast, applies purposeful epistemology more broadly. In their contributions to this volume, Sandy Goldberg, Declan Smithies, and Jonathan Weinberg extend this approach to epistemic justification, while Peter Graham provides an account of epistemic normativity more generally. This highlights the extensive role that purposeful epistemology might play in contemporary philosophy.

Epistemic Evaluation consists of five parts and eleven chapters, plus an introduction. I will briefly touch on each chapter, but the editors have provided a far more detailed summary of the book than I can give here (see pp. 11-28). My aim is to highlight some applications of purposeful epistemology, consider a few objections, and point to potential benefits.

In the volume's opening chapter, Georgi Gardiner explores the methodology of purposeful epistemology, which she calls a 'teleology', and contrasts it with more orthodox approaches such as conceptual and linguistic analysis. This chapter is largely taxonomical, but it nicely outlines the methodology and explains how it differs from the way epistemology is usually done. Gardiner argues that purposeful epistemology supplements (rather than competes with) the more orthodox approaches by increasing 'the kinds of sources that feature in our reflective equilibrium' (42). That's all well and good, but the more interesting and contentious issue is *how much* weight we should give to considerations about the purpose of epistemic evaluation. Purposeful epistemologists think these considerations have been given too little weight, but critics will say purposeful epistemology gives them too much weight.

Perhaps the most common objection to purposeful epistemology is that it relies on dubious quasi-historical postulations.¹ The central target has been Craig's genealogical story, which traces the development of our concept of knowledge from a more primitive concept that arose in a 'state of nature.' Elizabeth Fricker furthers this line of criticism in her contribution to the volume. She argues that two features of Craig's proposal are incoherent: inquirers in an epistemic state of nature lack our present day concept of knowledge, yet these inquirers share a language and use it to share information. This is incoherent, says Fricker, because 'the practice of intentionally sharing information involves the practice of asserting, a speech act which itself requires that speaker and hearer *already* possess the concept of knowledge' (13).

Fortunately, this quasi-historical baggage is easily jettisoned, as several theorists have noted.² Indeed, Craig himself calls the state-of-nature component of his view a 'nonloadbearing frill' (2007: 193), and Fricker is aware of this fact (see fn.15). Why, then, does she think her objection is 'apparently crushing' (64)? I think the deeper issue is that Craig puts the cart before the horse. He thinks that a kind of linguistic practice can shed light on knowledge, whereas Fricker thinks that knowledge can shed light on the linguistic practice. On this issue, they can't both be right.

In 'What's the Point?' David Henderson and Terence Horgan use the purpose of the concept of knowledge to motivate a version of epistemological contextualism. This chapter largely rehearses Henderson's earlier 'gatekeeping' account of knowledge ascriptions (2009, 2011), which says epistemic evaluation is used to regulate sources of information for various epistemic communities. What's new and interesting is that this chapter tackles a vexed issue for purposeful epistemology, namely, does the concept of knowledge serve *multiple* purposes (and if so, which purpose is *primary*)? The authors evaluate three possible functions and conclude that 'gatekeeping' is probably one of *several* fundamental roles of knowledge ascriptions. This raises an important question: if our concepts, norms, or practices play a plurality of roles, can we justifiably appeal to some select function as an adequacy constraint for epistemic theorizing?

Part II of the volume centers on epistemic contextualism and pragmatic encroachment. Matthew McGrath appeals to two functions of knowledge ascriptions

¹ See Fricker (1998), Williams (2002), Weinberg (2006), Kusch (2011), and Gelfert (2011).

² Kappel (2010) and Hannon (2013) make this point.

to adjudicate the dispute between contextualists and their rivals about the semantics of knowledge ascriptions. Stephen Grimm also appeals to the role of knowledge ascriptions, but he defends *stakes-sensitive invariantism*, a view that says practical stakes influence what it takes to know. This sort of ‘pragmatic encroachment’ is now familiar in epistemology (and Grimm argues it was endorsed by Descartes, Locke, and Clifford), but this chapter makes two advancements: first, Grimm defends a ‘rising tides’ view according to which the practical interests that bear on knowledge might be those of an evaluator, a subject, or some third parties that may later draw on the information; second, he uses this account to explain why the standards for knowledge will not change radically as our practical interests change. As information-dependent and information-sharing creatures, the thresholds for knowledge will ‘gravitate towards a level high enough to respect the “typical” or ‘normal’ stakes of others who might appeal to those judgments’ (129). This allows Grimm to clarify *how much* justification is required for knowledge.

In Part III, Michael Williams and Jonathan Weinberg use purposeful epistemology to defend the traditional idea that knowledge requires the ability to give reasons. Weinberg arrives at this conclusion by considering what goals the norms of justification are meant to promote. Weinberg identifies two epistemic goals, which he calls *diachronic reliability* and *dialectical robustness*, each of which elucidates why an agent must be able to cite an appropriate reason for *p* to be justified in believing *p*. Williams has a similar view, but he defends a form of *neo-pragmatism* that ‘eschew[s] any fundamental explanatory appeal to semantic notions, particularly truth and reference’ (165). This marks a break with the previous chapters’ attempts to determine the truth-conditions of knowledge ascriptions by reflecting on their function.

Part IV centers on the ‘internalism/externalism’ debate. For decades this issue has seemed intractable, which has led many to think the disagreement is merely verbal—no more than ‘a vain beating of the air’ (Alston 2005: 11). Sanford Goldberg reframes the dispute to show the disagreement is substantive, while Smithies more directly applies purposeful epistemology to the theory of justification. Smithies says we can avoid purely terminological disagreements by defining the concept of justification in terms of its role in our epistemic practices, then ask what justification must be like to play that role. He hypothesizes that justification is the epistemic property that makes a belief stable under ideal critical reflection (225), and he uses this analysis to defend a version of access internalism. This epistemic ideal is worth caring about, he says, because it is a distinguishing mark of being a person.

Part V investigates the metaphysical status of epistemic norms. In ‘Epistemic Normativity and Social Norms,’ Peter Graham argues that many epistemic norms are social norms (like dress codes). This chapter provides a nice explication of what social norms are, how they work to promote or discourage behavior, and how the purposes of these social-epistemic norms are tied to evolutionary theory. The idea, roughly, is that they produce functionally adaptive groups, which facilitates human survival and flourishing.

In the final chapter, John Greco applies purposeful epistemology to issues in the epistemology of testimony. By reflecting on why we have a concept of knowledge,

Greco says we can resolve questions about whether testimonial knowledge is reducible to other types of knowledge, whether it generates knowledge, and whether it is distinctively social in a way that is epistemically interesting. He adopts Craig's idea that knowledge attributions certify reliable informants (an idea endorsed by almost every author in the volume), but Greco elaborates on this idea in an interesting way. He says the concept of knowledge governs two kinds of activities: those concerned with *acquiring* information (i.e. 'gatekeeping') and those concerned with *distributing* information throughout the community of knowers. Once we appreciate that these activities will be governed by different norms, we can resolve the aforementioned issues by showing there is truth on *both* sides of each dispute.

This volume shows a way of doing post-Gettier epistemology. Rather than start by consulting our intuitions about cases (which has proven to be insufficient for adjudicating among theoretical options), we should investigate the purposes for which we use certain concepts, the distinctions and norms that would best serve our purposes, and why those distinctions, norms, and concepts should be a topic of central concern in philosophy. In addition to casting light on the nature, purpose, and value of epistemic evaluation, purposeful epistemology also facilitates progress on a variety of epistemological issues, such as the relationship between knowledge and practical reasoning, the semantics of knowledge ascriptions, and the internalism/externalism debate. This is not to suggest that purposeful epistemology is the *only* method epistemologists should use. But it is, as the editors point out, 'an important and underappreciated item in the toolbox' (3). I highly recommend this book.³

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