

IS EPISTEMOLOGY A KIND OF INQUIRY?

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ABSTRACT: There are three widely held beliefs among epistemologists: (1) the goal of inquiry is truth or something that entails truth; (2) epistemology aims for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium; (3) epistemology is a kind of inquiry. I argue that accepting (1) and (2) entails denying (3). This is a problem especially for the philosophers (e.g., Duncan Pritchard and Alvin Goldman) who accept both (1) and (2), for in order to be consistent, they must reject (3).

THERE are three widely held beliefs among epistemologists: (1) the goal of inquiry is truth or something that entails truth; (2) epistemology aims for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium; (3) epistemology is a kind of inquiry.¹ Yet accepting (1) and (2) entails denying (3), or so I shall argue.

I. THE GOAL OF INQUIRY

It's widely thought that the goal of inquiry is truth or something that entails truth. For example, Alvin Goldman writes, "The chief rationale, quite simply, is that the goal of truth is the common denominator of intellectual pursuits, whatever methods or practices are championed as the best means to this end. True belief is the shared aim of the Inquisitor and the scientist, of the creationist and the evolutionist, and of all the competing research programmes that populate the agonistic arena of science" (Goldman 1987, 124–125). Laurence Bonjour writes, "What makes us cognitive beings at all is our capacity for belief, and the goal of our distinctively cognitive endeavors is truth: we want our beliefs to correctly and accurately depict the world." (Bonjour 1985, 7). Ernest Sosa seems to think that the goal of inquiry is knowledge, for he writes, "We're supposed to be able to clinch an answer to a question, and thereby conclude inquiry, when we attain knowledge of that answer" (Sosa 2011, 67). Since Sosa holds (roughly) that knowledge is true belief manifesting some competence of the agent, he must accept that the goal of inquiry is something that entails truth. Duncan Pritchard (2008)

argues that the proper goal of inquiry is understanding, not knowledge or mere true belief. The term ‘understanding’ is used in a variety of ways. Epistemologists are mainly interested in two usages. One concerns a specific proposition, like “I understand why p is the case.” The other concerns a subject matter, as in “I understand quantum physics,” or even “I understand my boss.”² Pritchard (2009) calls the first “the atomistic usage” and the second “the holistic usage.” He believes the atomistic usage is the paradigmatic usage of ‘understanding.’ The goal of inquiry is not to understand a subject matter, but to understand why p is the case. According to Pritchard (2008; 2009), the paradigmatic usage of ‘understanding’ shows that understanding is necessarily factive, just like knowledge. Knowledge is necessarily factive in that it is impossible to know that p unless ‘p’ is true. But what does “understanding is necessarily factive” mean? Does it simply mean that it is impossible to understand why p in terms of q unless ‘p’ and ‘q’ are both true? Pritchard offers the following example: “suppose that I believe that my house has burned down because of an act of vandalism, when it was in fact caused by faulty wiring. Do I understand why my house burned down? Clearly not.” It seems that for Pritchard, it is impossible to understand why p in terms of q unless both ‘p’ and ‘q’ are true. So he has to accept that the goal of inquiry is something that entails truth.

II. THE GOAL OF EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology is widely recognized as a kind of inquiry. For example, Ernest Sosa et al. define epistemology as “a philosophical inquiry into the nature, conditions, and extent of human knowledge” (Sosa et al. 2008, ix). A. C. Grayling characterizes epistemology as “the branch of philosophy concerned with enquiry into the nature, sources and validity of knowledge” (Grayling 2003, 38). Peter Klein concludes his article “epistemology” for the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* with the sentence “it is clear that epistemology remains a vigorous area of inquiry at the heart of philosophy” (Klein 2005).

It is also wildly held that epistemology aims for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium. In fact, according to Pritchard, this view is universally shared by analytical epistemologists. He says, “The methodology of analytical epistemology is essentially the application of a process of reflective equilibrium to the inputs just described” (Pritchard 2012, 99). David K. Henderson and Terence Horgan characterize analytical epistemology in a similar way: “Epistemologists commonly characterize their discipline as devoted to achieving a kind of wide reflective equilibrium” (Henderson and Horgan 2011, 181). This might be an overstatement. But it is undeniable that many epistemologists do hold that epistemology aims for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium.

Pritchard (2012) himself is an example. According to him, the epistemologist ultimately seeks a reflectively stable theory of knowledge that can accommodate a particular set of inputs by applying a process of reflective equilibrium to these inputs.³ The set of inputs includes the epistemologist’s current intuitions, her previous intuitions, others’ intuitions, and empirical data such as relevant work done by cognitive scientists. Pritchard distinguishes four kinds of intuitions: extensional, intensional, general and linguistic. Firstly, extensional intuitions are our intuitive

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responses to cases, where we are asked to form an intuitive judgment about whether the target term is applicable in the case under discussion. For example, in a classic Gettier case, that Smith does not know that the man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket is an example of extensional intuition. Secondly, intensional intuitions are our intuitions regarding the intension of the target term. Here are three claims about knowledge that are often offered as intensional intuitions: (a) Knowledge that *p* entails *p*; (b) *S*'s knowledge that *p* entails that *S* believes that *p*; (c) *S*'s knowledge that *p* entails that *S*'s belief that *p* is not true simply as a matter of luck. Thirdly, general intuitions about a term are neither about its intension or its extension. For example, that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief is often cited as an important epistemological intuition, but while this intuition is clearly about knowledge, it is neither about its extension nor its intension. Finally, linguistic intuitions are about the correct usage of the word "knows" in a particular conversational context. Pritchard further divides each kind of intuition into two classes: initial intuition and intuition under reflection. The former is like a gut feeling while the latter is the product of the application of the relevant intellectual virtues, such as close attention to the salient details, a keen eye for spotting potential ambiguities in cases, and so on.

How should these inputs be accommodated? Pritchard's (2012) answer is that we should apply a process of reflective equilibrium to the inputs. Since sometimes some inputs contradict each other, the epistemologist cannot respect all the inputs. She has to reject some of them in order to be consistent. But which to reject? According to Pritchard, each individual input is defeasible, that is, the epistemologist may reject any *individual* input. But there are three principles the epistemologist must obey: (i) the most deep-seated intensional intuitions about a concept (Pritchard calls them "intensional platitudes") should not be rejected *en masse*; (ii) intuitions under reflection are privileged over initial intuitions; (iii) the extensional intuitions that trade on a real-life example are privileged over the extensional intuitions that trade on examples which concern far-fetched scenarios (for example, cases that appeal to science fiction).⁴ If the epistemologist follows these three principles, she achieves the goal of epistemology when she has a reflectively stable theory.

Like Pritchard, Goldman (1986) is another prominent epistemologist who holds that epistemology aims for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium. Take his solution to the problem of the criteria of justification, for example. According to Goldman, *S*'s believing *p* at time *t* is justified if and only if *S*'s believing *p* at *t* is permitted by a right system of justificational rules (J-rules). What is a right J-rule system? Goldman offers a few examples of candidate criteria for rightness of J-rule systems:

- (1) Conformity with *R* would guarantee a coherent set of beliefs.
- (2) *R* permits doxastic attitudes proportioned to the strength of one's evidence.
- (3) Conformity with *R* would maximize the total number of true beliefs a cognizer would obtain.

In order to identify an acceptable criterion, what method should be used? Goldman writes, “The strategy I endorse is best expressed by the Goodman-Rawls conception of ‘considered judgments in reflective equilibrium’” (1986, 66).

Here is how that strategy works. First, we examine what rule systems would likely be generated by each candidate criterion and reflect on implications of these rule systems for particular judgments of justifiedness and unjustifiedness. Then we check these judgments against our pretheoretic intuitions. A criterion is supported to the extent that implied judgments match up with such intuitions, and weakened to the extent that they do not. But our initial intuitions are not final. They can be rejected by reflection on candidate rule systems.

Since Goldman endorses this strategy when theorizing about justification, it seems reasonable to surmise that he, like Pritchard, believes that epistemology aims for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium.

III. IS EPISTEMOLOGY A KIND OF INQUIRY?

If epistemology aims for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium, then the goal of epistemology is not truth or something that entails truth, for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium might be completely false. Many philosophers (e.g., Michael DePaul 1993) have pointed out that reflective equilibrium does not guarantee truth. Here I will use Pritchard’s account of reflective equilibrium as an example to briefly explain why a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium might be completely false.

Pritchard (2012) notices there would be a fair degree of divergence amongst epistemologists in terms of the respective reflective equilibria that they reach. In principle, two epistemologists might come up with two completely contradictory theories of knowledge. Suppose each of them rejects some of the intensional platitudes. Since each *individual* input can be rejected, one epistemologist might reject what the other accepts and accept what the other rejects. This case is perhaps unlikely, but still possible. In such case, Pritchard would say both epistemologists achieve the goal of epistemology. But that raises a problem. Their theories—systems of beliefs after reaching reflective equilibria—cannot be both true. In fact, one epistemologist achieves the goal of epistemology while ending up with a theory of knowledge that is completely false. In a less extreme case, after reaching reflective equilibria, two epistemologists might partly agree on the nature of knowledge, but still have disagreements. For example, they might agree that knowledge requires true belief, but one thinks that a person can know that *p* even if she has no evidence for *p*, while the other might hold that if a person has no evidence for *p*, she cannot know that *p*. The two views cannot be both true. Besides, it is possible that what the two epistemologists agree on is false. Convergence does not imply that truth is reached. Thus it is still possible that one achieves the goal of epistemology but her theory of knowledge is completely false.

If the goal of epistemology is a reflectively stable theory that does not entail truth, but the goal of inquiry is truth or something that entails truth, then epistemology is not a kind of inquiry. Put differently, the following three claims cannot be all true: (1) the goal of inquiry is something that entails truth; (2) the goal of

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epistemology is a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium; (3) epistemology is a kind of inquiry.

This is a problem especially for those who accept both (1) and (2). We have seen that Pritchard and Goldman explicitly endorse both (1) and (2). To be consistent, they have to deny (3). But if epistemology is not a kind of inquiry, what is it? Is it poem? Or fiction? Or religion? Pritchard and Goldman have to offer an account of the nature of epistemology different from the popular view (i.e., epistemology, like physics, is a kind of inquiry).

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The tension discussed above is not restricted to epistemology. A similar tension also exists in the area of moral philosophy. For example, John Rawls remarks in the beginning of *A Theory of Justice*, “Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust” (Rawls 1999, 3). Here he seems to suggest that the goal of inquiry is something that entails truth. But then he argues that moral philosophy should employ the method of reflective equilibrium. It seems that he does not think the method offers us the best chance of achieving truth, for he never claims that what emerges from his reflective equilibrium are probably “truths” of justice.⁵ Rather, he seems to think that moral philosophy simply aims at achieving a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium. So it seems that he has to deny that moral philosophy is a kind of inquiry.

The tension can be generalized. If one believes that the goal of inquiry is truth or something that entails truth and that philosophy aims for a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium, she must deny that philosophy is a kind of inquiry.⁶

ENDNOTES

1. By “epistemology is a kind of inquiry,” I mean that inquiry is a type of thing, and that epistemology is alleged by some philosophers to be one token or instance of that type. It’s not the only instance (physics is another token of the type), of course.
2. Some might believe understanding a subject consists in believing a long conjunction of propositions. So the second sense of ‘understanding’ is just reducible to the first. But many philosophers (e.g., Catherine Z. Elgin 2009 and Jonathan Kvanvig 2003) oppose such view.
3. Here Pritchard seems to use ‘epistemology’ and ‘theory of knowledge’ interchangeably. But he also thinks that epistemologists should theorize about understanding, which is *not* a species of knowledge in his view (see Pritchard 2009, 38). So when he says “What the epistemologist is seeking is a reflectively stable theory of knowledge,” he does not really mean that a reflectively stable theory of knowledge is *all* what the epistemologist is seeking. Rather, he uses knowledge merely as an illustration.
4. Pritchard seems to think that (ii) and (iii) are obviously true. He only offers an argument for the first principle (2012): our most basic intensional intuitions about a concept play the role of picking out the very thing that we are trying to understand, and hence we cannot

depart too far from them without losing that which we seek. An account of knowledge that did not respect many of our most fundamental intensional intuitions about this term would be unlikely to count as a theory of knowledge at all. At one place, Pritchard even suggests (i) is the only real constraint on a theory of knowledge.

5. See Norman Daniels 2011.

6. However, to maintain both that philosophy is a kind of inquiry and that philosophy aims at achieving a reflectively stable theory via reflective equilibrium, one does not have to reject that truth is a goal of inquiry. For example, Michael DePaul (1993, 91) argues that there is more than one goal of inquiry. True belief is a goal. Warranted belief is another goal. Rational belief is a third goal. These goals could be independent of each other. The theory obtained via reflective equilibrium achieves the goal of rational belief. Acknowledgements: I am grateful to Nathan Ballantyne, Stephen Grimm, Greg Lynch, Emily Sullivan, Matt Carrella, Chris Rice and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

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