

Epistemology

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Epistemology is the study of knowledge. This entry covers epistemology in two parts: one historical, one contemporary. The former provides a brief theological history of epistemology. The latter outlines three categories of contemporary epistemology: traditional epistemology, social epistemology, and formal epistemology, along with corresponding theological questions that arise in each.

I. A Theological History of Epistemology

The purpose of this section is to give a condensed overview of epistemology's theological history, beginning with Christian Scripture then moving to broad themes in ancient, medieval, and modern epistemic frameworks.

Scripture presents a tension in human knowledge. We are cognitively limited and often have mixed motives; God is transcendent. But knowledge is nonetheless a worthy pursuit—we rightfully want to know God, and God is revealing himself.

On one hand, human knowledge isn't perfect; we must "lean not on our own understanding" (Prov. 3:5). Adam and Eve's misguided desire for the knowledge of good and bad lead to the fall (Gen. 3). Moses asked to see God's glory, and God showed himself to Moses, but only God's back, because "no one can see my face and live" (Ex. 33:20). Or consider the end of Job where, rather than answering Job's questions directly, God insisted Job trust God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe (Job 38). The revelation of God comes to a turning point in Jesus, who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). And Scripture promises that, while we now see only dimly and only know in part, we will eventually see God face to face, knowing in full (1 Cor. 13:12).

While our understanding of the divine is limited and developing, Scripture is nevertheless clear about the value of knowledge and reasoning. God created us—body, mind, and spirit—declaring his creation "very good" (Gen 1:31). We are called to love God with our whole selves, including intellectually (Deut. 6:5, Mt. 22:37, Luke 10:27). Biblical figures are commended for using their minds well. In Acts, Apollos "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:28). Further, the Bereans didn't simply believe whatever Paul says without question; they were praised for testing what Paul said with the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). The epistles encourage use of our minds—to grow in "knowledge and dept of insight," (Phil 1:9), "always being ready to give a reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15) and "testing all things, holding onto the good" (1 Thess. 5:21). Seeking knowledge of God and learning to reason well are thus worthy, biblical pursuits.

Another foundational epistemic topic in the Bible is *testimony*. More specifically, Scripture is full of cases where a person is forced to choose between two competing testifiers: the testimony of God or God's messenger and a voice leading away from God (Johnson 2018). Take one of the first stories in Scripture: the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve chose to believe the serpent rather than God, and this epistemological mistake led to negative consequences for all humanity. Competing testimony is similarly present in the history of Israel, as they were constantly faced with the choice of whether to listen to God's prophets or trust their own wisdom, "doing what is right in their

own eyes” (Judges 17:6). Despite God’s people constantly listening to other voices, God continued to communicate with them, ultimately through Jesus Christ (see Johnson 2018: chapter 5). Furthermore, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, who plays a crucial role in the Apostle Paul’s epistemic system, particularly in human knowledge of God (see Moser’s chapter in Part III of Abraham and Aquino 2017). As Johnson (2018: 149) concludes, “Christian epistemology cannot ignore the foundational role of authenticated agents who guide others to know.” Notably, the Bible foreshadows what is now known as *social epistemology*, the study of knowledge in cases involving more than one agent. We return to these themes in the next section, especially when we consider contemporary debates involving testimony, disagreement, and standpoint epistemology.

Outside of Scripture, ancient historical thinkers focused less on social knowledge and more on questions concerning a single knower: What is knowledge? How much can we know? What is the goal of knowing? Plato (who wrote Socrates’ dialogues) famously addresses this first question concerning the nature of knowledge. He suggested the following definition: knowledge is justified true belief. You cannot know something that is false, but lucky guesses also aren’t knowledge, so in order to know, your belief must be both true and justified. While there is some historical controversy over whether this definition is endorsed, Socrates suggested this definition in *Theaetetus* 201, and perhaps endorsed it in *Meno* 98. Either way, this is an early and well-known definition of knowledge that sets the research agenda for future discussions about the nature of knowledge, further discussed in the next section.

Pasnau (2017), however, argues that Plato’s focus on defining knowledge is the exception, rather than the rule. Historically, philosophers focused on the extent and aim of knowledge, rather than its definition. And much early epistemology is idealized—it sets a high bar for what we should aspire to as knowers. For instance, in the *Posteriori Analytics*, Aristotle concerns himself with *episteme* (often translated ‘knowledge’). However, the requirements for *episteme* are quite stringent, such that we cannot achieve it in most domains. Pasnau argues that we shouldn’t understand *episteme* as everyday knowledge, but a kind of epistemic ideal to which we should aim. We find a similar theme in medieval epistemologists, who argued that knowledge has both an objective element—the object of knowledge that is stable and/or necessary—and a subjective element—a state of maximal confidence (see Pasnau 2017: 21ff).

Some responded to this high bar by embracing various versions of skepticism, the view that we know nothing or almost nothing. Pyrrho of Elis advocated for what is now called *Pyrrhonian skepticism*, which maintains that we don’t have knowledge and embracing this fact is key to happiness and peace. Similarly, Descartes and Hume both challenged much of our everyday knowledge, with Descartes arguing that everything can be doubted except the *Cogito*—“I think, therefore, I am”—and Hume contesting our knowledge in many domains, including causation and induction.

This rigorous epistemic ideal came with theological implications, discussed by philosophers such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and Pascal. These authors suggested that, in cases where we don’t have full knowledge or understanding, faith steps in. Augustine (*Tractate* 29) and Anselm (*Proslogion* I) advocated for “faith seeking understanding,” both adopting versions of the saying “I believe so that I may understand.” Aquinas argued that faith is a means of knowing, especially of knowing God (*Summa* II–II q.129). Pascal argued that even if we cannot reason our way to knowledge of Christianity, we have reason to commit to God on the basis of practical considerations (*Pensées*, part III, 233).

The early modern philosopher John Locke is one of the first to challenge idealized epistemology. Locke suggested that proportionality, rather than certainty, is our epistemic goal. We shouldn’t

seek perfect, impeccable knowledge. Instead, we ought to proportion our beliefs to the evidence (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, ch. XVI). Further, we don't resort to proportionality because knowledge is unattainable. Rather, knowledge is widespread—the epistemic bar for knowing should be brought down (Pasnau 2017: 117ff). Locke's proportionality principle set the stage for what is today called *formal epistemology*, a branch of epistemology that concerns probability, including how we should form and revise our confidence levels.

There are many other figures with theologically influential epistemologies. For instance, Jonathan Edwards drew a connection between theological knowledge and religious affections (“a renewed heart”), Søren Kierkegaard argued that faith is unreasonable and “absurd” but nonetheless valuable, and John Henry Newman defended religious belief as a form of knowing. The history of epistemology is extensive and complex, and here we are restricted to a short summary. Before moving to contemporary issues, I direct the curious reader to Part III of Abraham and Aquino (2017) for extended discussions of the epistemic frameworks of theologians throughout history and to Pasnau (2017) for a rich summary of epistemology's philosophical history.

II. Contemporary Issues in Epistemology

We now turn to contemporary debates, with a focus on three main branches of epistemology: traditional, social, and formal.

2.1. Traditional Epistemology

Traditional epistemology concerns questions about knowledge and justified belief. The first and most basic question of traditional epistemology concerns *the nature of knowledge*. As we saw above, Plato suggested that knowledge is justified true belief. This definition was not directly challenged until the 1960s, when Edmund Gettier provided cases of justified true belief that are not knowledge (Sosa et al 2008: ch. 15). Suppose you look up at the clock in your office and notice that it says 4:00, and, on that basis, you believe it is 4:00. This belief is justified—the clock has always been reliable in the past. However, unbeknownst to you, the clock has recently stopped working. But the moment you looked up at the clock, it also happened to be 4:00, so your belief is luckily true. In this case, you have a justified, true belief, but your belief is not knowledge—you got lucky. Gettier provided several cases with a similar structure that have now convinced most epistemologists that knowledge is not merely justified true belief. We need a fourth condition, often called an *anti-Gettier* condition. There is no widespread agreement on what exactly this condition is, although many think it has to do with the environment in which the belief is formed. Others, such as Timothy Williamson, have argued the project to find the anti-Gettier condition is misguided. We should give up on attempting to define knowledge, and instead treat knowledge as basic, understanding other concepts in terms of knowledge (see Sosa et al 2008: ch. 18. For more on defining knowledge, see Sosa et al 2008: part III).

Much ink in traditional epistemology has also been spilt over what it means for a belief to be *justified*. The primary debate about justification is between internalists and externalists. *Internalists* argue that justification is something accessible to the agent. For instance, if I have a justified belief that it will rain tomorrow, I must be aware of evidence that it will rain tomorrow. *Externalists*, by contrast, argue that justification isn't always accessible to the agent. Instead, when I have a justified belief that it will rain tomorrow, this is because my belief exhibits certain virtues, was formed by a reliable method, or was produced via proper functioning (see Sosa et al 2008: part V).

Traditional epistemology, like historical epistemology, also concerns *the scope of knowledge*. Philosophers continue to debate whether knowledge is possible, and if it is possible, what can be known. Some epistemologists still defend skepticism—the view that we have no knowledge—whereas others insist knowledge is quite widespread (see Sosa et al 2008: part I).

These issues in traditional epistemology have theological analogues. For example: can we know whether God exists? If God exists, can we know what God is like? And if we can know about God, how is this possible? The debates described in the previous paragraphs have implications for these questions. For example, most internalists about justification argue that evidence is required to know that God exists. By contrast, if externalism is correct, then it might be possible to know that God exists without evidence. Plantinga (2000) argues for an externalist view on which belief in God can be justified without an argument. This doctrine implies that religious people need not engage with philosophical arguments in order to know that God exists. Plantinga's work set the stage for what is now known as *reformed epistemology*.

2.2. Social Epistemology

While traditional epistemology focuses on a single knower, social epistemology concerns more than one knower. Above, we saw that biblical authors frequently discussed *testimonial knowledge*, a major topic in social epistemology today. For instance, suppose you tell me it is going to rain tomorrow. Can I know this on the basis of your testimony? Do I have to know you are reliable in order to know this? Should we always trust expert testimony? What if there isn't expert consensus? (See Sosa et al: part IX).

Disagreement is also epistemologically significant. Suppose we are hiking in a forest, and we are trying to find the way back to the car. We encounter a fork in the trail; you are convinced we should go left, while I am sure we should go right. Suppose we are both similarly reliable about this question—equal reliability marks what philosophers call an *epistemic peer*. Are we required to be less confident upon encountering peer disagreement? Some philosophers, *conciliationists*, argue yes; epistemic humility requires that we be less confident when peers disagree with us. However, *steadfasters* say no, because, for example, there is widespread peer disagreement about political and ethical matters, but it doesn't seem irrational to be quite confident in our political or ethical views.

Disagreement and testimony raise theological questions. Many Christians hold their religious beliefs on the basis of testimony—the testimony of the authors of Scripture, religious authorities, their families, or even testimony directly from God. Do these testimonial beliefs amount to knowledge? What (if anything) justifies trusting religious authority? Further, religious disagreement is widespread. People disagree about whether God exists and about which religion is true. Religious disagreement may threaten religious knowledge, unless either steadfasters are right or those who disagree are not epistemic peers (see Benton et al 2018: part III).

Finally, there are views, often generally grouped under the heading of *standpoint epistemology*, on which one's social position makes a difference to what one knows. More specifically, standpoint epistemologists argue that factors such as gender, race, and culture make an epistemic difference: to what concepts one deploys, what evidence one has, and how one interprets and processes evidence. For example, women might have insights about the morality of abortion that wouldn't occur to men. Or consider a theological example: someone from an honor/shame culture might notice unique biblical themes that others wouldn't pick up on. Standpoint epistemology has been theologically influential, epistemically as a part of feminist theology and libertarian theology (see Abraham and Aquino 2017: part IV).

2.3. Formal Epistemology

Traditional and social epistemology focus on questions about knowledge and justified belief. However, some epistemologists argue there is more to the story. To see why, note that we are more confident in some of our beliefs than in others: I believe both $1+1=2$ and that it will rain tomorrow, but I am more confident that $1+1=2$ than that it will rain tomorrow. Formal epistemologists model our confidence levels, often called ‘credences’, on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 represents maximal confidence that something is false, and 1 represents maximal confidence that something is true. So, I might have a credence of 1 that $1+1=2$, but a credence of 0.9 that it will rain tomorrow (if the forecast predicts a 90% chance of rain).

Formal epistemology is the study of what makes credences rational. Many formal epistemologists are *Bayesians*. Bayesians argue that rational credences obey two rules. First, they are coherent. That means, for example, that if you have a high credence that it will rain tomorrow, then you should have a low credence that it won’t rain tomorrow. It would be irrational to be very confident both that it will rain tomorrow and that it won’t rain tomorrow. Second, you should update your credences when you learn new evidence, conforming your credences to the probabilities warranted by the new evidence. (Recall Locke’s dictum: proportion your beliefs to the evidence!) For example, if you go outside and see that the ground is wet, you should raise your credence that it rained recently. This process is called *conditionalization*.

Theological questions arise in formal epistemology. For instance: what credence should I have that *God exists*? Many arguments in philosophy of religion purport to raise or lower the probability of God’s existence. For instance, some defenders of the problem of evil argue that evil lowers the probability of theism. There are arguments that raise the probability of theism as well—for example, the fine tuning argument. Defenders of this argument maintain that the constants that enable our universe to be life-permitting make it highly probable that God exists. The tools of formal epistemology, such as conditionalization, can help us weigh this evidence for and against the existence of God and determine what credence to assign to God’s existence.

Finally, the previous section mentioned Pascal’s argument that there is practical reason to believe in God. Tools in formal epistemology are useful to evaluate Pascal’s wager, which purports to show that, even if one has a very low credence that God exists, they can still rationally live a Christian life (see Benton et al 2018: part II).

Generally, epistemology plays a key role in answering a wide array of theological questions. For more on the intersection between contemporary epistemology and theology, see Benton et al (2018) and Abraham and Aquino (2017: parts I, II, and IV).

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