**Metaepistemology**

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***Summary.*** Metaepistemology may be partly characterized as the study of the nature, aims, methods and legitimacy of epistemology. Given such a characterization, most epistemological views and theories have an important metaepistemological aspect or, at least, a number of more or less explicit metaepistemological commitments. Metaepistemology is an important area of philosophy because it exemplifies that philosophy must serve as its own meta-discipline by continuously reflecting critically on its own methods and aims. Even though philosophical methodology may be regarded as a branch of epistemology, epistemology itself is as much in need of metaphilosophical examination as other core disciplines of philosophy. Moreover, metaepistemology is important because it bears significantly on first-order epistemological questions. Indeed, many of the most prominent contemporary debates in philosophy have a distinctly metaepistemological aspect. For example, the debates between rationalists and empiricists do not only concern the nature of cognition of specific areas – perception, arithmetic, logic and so forth – but also general metaepistemological questions about whether it is realistic and desirable that epistemology be naturalized. Likewise, the debates between epistemic internalists and externalists include metaepistemological debates about whether the proper focus for epistemology should be the cognizer’s rational perspective or some more objective property of the cognizer’s epistemic position. Similarly, the debates concerning the relationship between folk epistemology and epistemological theorizing include metaepistemological debates about how empirical data concerning folk epistemology should impact epistemology itself. Each of these debates provides an example of how first-order epistemological issues are deeply connected, and sometimes inseparable from, metaepistemological considerations.

**1: Overview.** Given that epistemology concerns cognition, it concerns philosophical cognition. Indeed, philosophical methodology may be seen as a province of epistemology. But that does not mean that epistemology itself is exempt from methodological scrutiny. On the contrary, epistemology is, due to its status as a core philosophical discipline, continuously subject to meta-philosophical scrutiny. Thus, epistemology exemplifies – perhaps more vividly than any other philosophical discipline – that because philosophy does not have a meta-discipline it must continuously reflect critically on its own methods and aims. Consequently, first-order substantive epistemological discussions are often deeply interwoven with higher-order questions about epistemology’s proper roles, aims and methods. For example, the first-order questions are closely related the dispute between empiricism and rationalism as well as to the dispute between epistemic internalism and externalism. Likewise, first-order disputes are closely related to methodological disputes concerning how experimental studies of folk epistemology relate to epistemological theorizing. Thus, metaepistemology is important in part because it informs more specific and concrete work in epistemology as well as applied epistemology.

**2: Rationalism vs. empiricism.** A historically important metaepistemological dispute is the one between rationalist and empiricist approaches to cognition – i.e., to knowledge and warranted belief. (Here the term ‘warrant’ is used as a broad label for epistemic rationality.

There is a substantive debate about how to draw rationalism/empiricism distinction and further debates concern its role in the history of philosophy (see also Rationalism; Empiricism). However, a prominent way to draw the distinction focusses on the status of a priori judgments. A rationalist about a given area holds that we have a priori cognition of it whereas an empiricist will claim that our cognition is only a posteriori (see also A Priori). In this manner, the rationalism-empiricism dispute follows Kant’s characterization of a priority: “…we will understand by *a priori* cognitions not those that occur independently of this or that experience, but rather those that occur *absolutely* independently of all experience.” (Kant 1998/1787: B2-B3: 137).

Since it is only pure a priori cognitions that do not depend on sense experience at all, Kant’s characterization allows for dependence on experience in acquiring the concepts that figure in the judgment in question. Thus, the most prominently invoked notion of the a priori is, in the present terminology, that a judgment is warranted a priori just in case the *warrant* does not depend on experience even though the judgment may depend on experience (Burge 1993, 2013; Bonjour 1998; Casullo 2003; Casullo and Thurow 2013).

While rationalists emphasize the significance of a priori cognition, they differ in their accounts of the sources of such cognition. A prominent trend in the 20th Century consisted in taking the source of a priori judgments to be linguistic insofar as a priori judgments where taken to be analytic ones – i.e., true in virtue of meaning. Consequently, Quine’s denial of the distinction between the analytic and synthetic judgements in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* did not only cast doubt not on a radical brand of empiricism – namely, logical positivism – but it was also taken to compromise rationalism (Quine 1951). Quine’s own response was to develop another radical empiricism – namely, epistemological naturalism according to which *philosophy is continuous with science* (Quine 1969; see also Naturalized Epistemology). In the case of epistemology, Quine is clear that his naturalism is not meant to mere supplement traditional epistemology but to replace it: “Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science.” (Quine 1969: 82).

However, Kripke’s *Naming and Necessity* reaffirmed the Kantian tripartite distinction between the linguistic concept pair of analytic/synthetic sentences, the metaphysical concept pair of necessary/contingent truths and the epistemological concept pair of a priori/a posteriori judgments. Thus, skepticism about analyticity did not automatically entail skepticism about the a priori and this cleared a significant obstacle to rationalism. Moreover, Kripke’s ingenious thought experiments and general emphasis on reflection about counterfactual scenarios provided an influential broadly rationalist framework (Kripke 1980. For some criticism, see Gerken 2015). So, although both empiricism and its naturalist species continues to be influential, rationalism reestablished itself in the philosophical landscape from the 1970s and onwards.

It bears mention, however, that the relationship between the a priori and rationalism is a complex one. For example, Timothy Williamson rejects the a priori/a posteriori distinction (Williamson 2007, 2013. For criticism, see Casullo 2015). But notably Williamson’s rejection does not indicate any commitment to naturalism or to any other strong empiricism.

This historic tug o’ war between rationalists and empiricists continues to underlie many of the methodological debates that characterize contemporary epistemology. For example, the rationalism/empiricism dispute is intimately related to the internalism/externalism dispute.

**3: Internalism vs. externalism.** In recent decades, the internalism/externalism dispute has been extremely prominent in meta-epistemological debates (see also Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology). As an initial approximation, we may characterize epistemic internalists as concerned with the rational perspective of the cognizer whereas epistemic externalists may be characterized as concerned with objective properties such as truth-conduciveness of belief.

The relationship between the internalism/externalism dispute and the rationalist/empiricist dispute is, however, fairly complex. Many internalists self-identify as rationalists (Bonjour 1998) and many externalists self-identify as empiricists and even naturalists (Goldman 1986, Kornblith 2002). However, there are exceptions to this rule. Burge, for example, is a moderate rationalist who is also an epistemic externalist (Burge 1998; 2013).

The early internalism/externalism debates in epistemology have often presupposed monism about warrant. Monism is the view that there is only one type of warrant. Although often tacit the presupposition of warrant monism may serve as a tacit premise of an enthymematic argument against internalism or externalism. In other instances, pluralism is nominally accepted by but the opposing type of warrant is regarded as inferior or ultimately irrelevant. For example, epistemic internalists may suggest that epistemic externalists “change the subject” (Fumerton 1995; Stroud 1994; Cruz and Pollock 2004; Bonjour in Bonjour and Sosa 2003). Epistemic externalists, in turn, sometimes take internalist approaches to be expressions of misguided traditional preconceptions that must be overcome (Goldman 1999, Kornblith 2002). However, epistemic pluralists argue that both internalist and externalist types of epistemic rationality are crucial to recognize in epistemological theorizing (Dretske 2000; Burge 2003; Pritchard 2005; Sosa 2007a; Graham 2012; Gerken *forthcoming*).

A criterion for distinguishing internalist from externalist types of warrant is important to both monists and pluralists. Indeed, how the internalism-externalism distinction is drawn matters greatly for its meta-epistemological impact. So, let us consider a couple of attempts.

The most prominent internalism/externalism distinction is cast in terms of cognitive accessibility. Thus, Bonjour:

The most generally accepted account… …is that a theory is internalist if and only if it requires all the factors needed for a belief to be epistemically justified for a given person be cognitively accessible to that person… …a strong version of internalism would require that the believer actually be aware of the justifying factors in order to be justified; while a weaker version would only require that he be capable of becoming aware of them… (Bonjour 1992: 132ff)

Since the strong accessibilist criterion is typically deemed overly demanding, the most commonly adopted criterion is the following:

***Accessibilist Criterion***

A theory is internalist if and only if it requires all the factors needed for a belief to be epistemically justified for a given person be cognitively accessible to that person.

An accessbilist articulation of the criterion must involve a specification of the notion of accessibility. Typically, it is required that cognitive accessibility involves first-person reflection (Bonjour 1992, Burge 1993, 2003, Fumerton 1995). Given such a specification, it is natural for a rationalist to embrace epistemic internalism since the requirement of first-person reflection suggests at least an indispensable a priori *element* in cognition.

However, recently theorists have attempted to replace the *Accessbilist Criterion* with alternatives. For example, two epistemic internalists, Conee and Feldman, suggest the following *mentalist* criterion (Conee and Feldman 2001):

***Mentalist Criterion***

The justificatory status of a person’s doxastic attitudes strongly supervenes on the person’s occurrent and dispositional mental states, events and conditions.

This criterion appears to be a monist one insofar as it appears to rule out paradigmatic externalist theories such a process reliabilism (Goldman 1979; 1999). Indeed, the *Mentalist Criterion* is conceived as part of an internalist evidentialist framework (Conee and Feldman 2004).

Another approach consists in drawing the epistemic internalism-externalism distinction by reference to a distinction in the philosophy of mind – namely, the distinction between cognitive faculties of *reason* and more primitive cognitive faculties. Aspects of this approach can be found in Sosa’s reflection on animal and human knowledge and in Burge’s work (Sosa 2007a; Burge 2013). It is explicitly formulated as a criterion in (Gerken *forthcoming*):

***Reason Criterion (Justification)***

S’s warrant, W, for her belief that *p* is a justification if and only if W constitutively depends, for its warranting force, on the competent exercise of S’s faculty of reason.

Given the emphasis on the constitutive dependency on the faculty of reason, this characterization also suggests a broad, albeit imperfect, alignment between rationalism and internalist warrants (i.e., justifications). However, the *Reason Criterion* is set forth in a pluralist framework according to which externalist kinds of warrant (entitlements) that do not constitutively depend on the faculty of reason are indispensable in epistemological theorizing.

One reason why the internalist/externalist debates continue to be methodologically prominent is that it matters for the aims and methods of epistemology whether its focus is on the subject’s rational perspective or some more objective property of her epistemic position. For example, a focus on the latter is more easily seen as continuous with the cognitive sciences. Hence, it is easy to align epistemic externalism with radical empiricism of a naturalist variety (Goldman 1986; Kornblith 2002). But, as emphasized, the issue is complex in part due to the challenge from experimental philosophy and the relationship between folk epistemology and epistemological theorizing (see Section 4).

**4: Folk epistemology vs. epistemological theorizing.** Many epistemological theories are motivated by appeal to judgments about thought experiments. Consider, for example, contextualist theories according to which the truth-conditional contribution of the term ‘knows’ varies with variations in the speaker’s conversational context (DeRose 2009). According to DeRose, contextualism is partly motivated by what he labels the *methodology of the straightforward* and characterized as follows:

This ‘methodology of the straightforward’, as we may call it, takes very seriously the simple positive and negative claims speakers make utilizing the piece of language being studied, and puts a very high priority on making those natural and appropriate straightforward uses come out true, at least when that use is not based on some false belief the speaker has about some underlying matter of fact. Relatively little emphasis is then put on somewhat more complex matters, like what metalinguistic claims speakers will make and how they tend to judge how the content of one claim compares with another (e.g. whether one claim contradicts another (DeRose 2009: 153).

The methodology of the straightforward is not unique to contextualism. For example, Stanley as well as Fantl and McGrath appear to accept central aspects of the methodology and argue that it motivates subject-sensitive invariantism – roughly, this is the view that the practical factors partly determine whether someone knows (Stanley 2005: 13-15; Fantl and McGrath 2012). In fact, something close to the methodology of the straightforward appears to be a methodological commitment of many theories that move from patterns of intuitive epistemic judgments to epistemological theory.

However, in recent years experimental philosophers have sought to cast doubt on the methodology and, more generally, on what they refer to as “armchair methodology” (see also, Experimental Philosophy). Broadly construed, experimental philosophy is the attempt to answer philosophical questions by experimental methods and as such it may be said to represent a branch of empiricism (Knobe and Nichols 2008). The movement is often represented as divided between a *positive* program which seeks to supplement traditional methods with experimental ones and a *negative* program which seeks to criticize or even replace traditional methods. Thus, the latter may be categorized as a form of naturalized epistemology

We may distinguish between at least two types of challenges set forth by experimental philosophers (for a more fine-grained discussion, see Gerken 2017, Chapter 3.3). One challenge is that thought experimenting philosophers’ intuitive judgments are generally unreliable. Another challenge comes from the idea is that philosophers are not reliably representing what the folk would think or say.

The first line of criticism that philosopher’s intuitions are unreliable is exemplified by, for example, Swain et al. who on the basis of a study argue that judgments about Gettier-style cases are not stable and that this “undermines the supposed evidential status of these intuitions, such that philosophers [and others] who deal in intuitions can no longer rest comfortably in their armchairs” (Swain et al. 2008: 1. See also Bishop and Trout 2005; Weinberg 2007. For criticism, see Wright 2010; Nagel 2012).

The challenge that the patterns of folk epistemological judgments are in fact different from what the thought-experimenting philosophers claim that they are is exemplified by studies concerning cases of the type invoked to motivate contextualism. For example, a number of studies did not find any salient alternatives or practical factor effect on knowledge ascriptions (Buckwalter 2010, 2014; May et al. 2010; Feltz & Zarpentine 2010).

These studies have been opposed on reflective grounds (Keith DeRose 2011). But they have also been empirically challenged by studies which found the effects in question (for practical factor effects, see Pinillos 2012; Pinillos and Simpson 2014; Scripada and Stanley 2012. For salient alternative effects, see Schaffer and Knobe 2012; Nagel et al. 2013).

From a metaepistemological perspective, however, this debate may be seen congenial to the methodology of the straightforward insofar as it presupposes that the relevant patterns of knowledge ascriptions reflect basic epistemological facts. Thus Turri: “…people’s intuitive judgments about cases tend to manifest their competence, resulting in detectable patterns. We can then use these patterns when theorizing about the content of the norms.” (Turri 2015: 4011). Given such an outlook, an epistemological debate boils down to what the relevant patterns of intuitive judgments are. Some experimental philosophers simply insist that this is to be settled empirically.

However, a distinct approach consists in postulating cognitive biases of the relevant folk epistemological judgments. For example, Nagel argues that both salient alternative effects and practical factor effects are best explained by an *egocentric bias* which “…impairs our ability to suppress privileged information when evaluating the judgements of others.” (Nagel 2010: 301. See also Nagel 2008). Gerken, in turn, seeks to explain the salient alternative effects by an *epistemic focal bias* according to which a salient alternative is typically processed as epistemically relevant even though it is not (2012, 2017). While postulating a cognitive bias is an empirically informed approach, it leaves a very significant role for epistemological theorizing. Indeed, Nagel provides a defense of the case method (Nagel 2012) whereas Gerken outlines an *equilibristic* methodology according to which philosophical reflection is required to interpret and evaluate experimental data (Gerken 2017). The underlying idea is that our epistemological theories may come apart from our folk epistemology and, more ambitiously, that they may on occasion be invoked to correct it.

Less empirically informed criticism of experimental philosophy has been presented by a number of traditional philosophers. Often this takes the form of an *expertise defense* according to which trained philosophers are better positioned to form judgments about philosophical thought experiments than the laypersons (see, e.g., Sosa 2007b; Williamson 2007, 2011). Unsurprisingly, experimental philosophers have responded to this approach (Weinberg *et al*. 2010; Machery 2017. For an overview, see Nado 2014).

The methodological debates over intuitive judgments and experimental measures thereof may be regarded as a contemporary instance of the rationalist/empiricist dispute. However, as elsewhere the alignment is imperfect. For example, Goldman provides a defense of the role of intuitive judgments by situating it in a naturalistic framework (Goldman 2007).

**5. Final remarks.** Whereas scientific disciplines have philosophy of science as their meta-discipline, philosophy must, at least partly, serve itself in this regard. Insofar as philosophical methods must be epistemically assessed, this is to a considerable extent an epistemological enterprise. However, epistemology itself is, *qua* central philosophical discipline, equally in need of such assessments. This raises special problems for meta-epistemology. For example, it raises the question as to whether it is viciously circular to use epistemological methods to assess themselves. This question sustains the long-standing debate between rationalists and empiricists. Rationalists are optimistic about a priori methods being capable of doing the relevant meta-epistemological work whereas empiricists argue that meta-epistemology must resort or even reduce to scientific methods. Consequently, this grand dispute has contemporary incarnations in the internalism/externalism dispute and in the methodological debates between experimentalists and their opponents. If induction is to be trusted, further incarnations of the rationalist/empiricist dispute will be prominent in future meta-epistemological debates.

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A Priori.

Internalism and externalism in epistemology.

Naturalized epistemology.

Rationalism.

Empiricism.

Experimental philosophy.

**Literature.**

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