

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING EPISTEMOLOGY

1.1 Introductory Discourse

Epistemology, as a distinct field of inquiry, predates the introduction of the term into the lexicon of philosophy. John Locke, for instance, described his efforts in *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689) as an inquiry “into the original, certainty, and extent of human knowledge, together with the grounds and degrees of belief, opinion, and assent.”¹

René Descartes, who is often credited as the father of modern philosophy, was often preoccupied with epistemological questions in his work. Almost every major historical philosopher has considered questions about what we know and how we know it. Among the Ancient Greek philosophers, Plato distinguished between inquiry regarding what we know and inquiry regarding what exists. A number of important epistemological concerns also appeared in the works of Aristotle.

During the subsequent Hellenistic period, philosophical schools began to appear which had a greater focus on epistemological questions, often in the form of philosophical skepticism. For instance, the Pyrrhonian skepticism of Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus held that eudaimonia (flourishing, happiness, or “the good life”) could be attained through the application of epoché (suspension of judgment) regarding all non-evident matters.² Pyrrhonism was particularly concerned with undermining the epistemological dogmas of Stoicism and Epicureanism. The other major school of Hellenistic skepticism was Academic skepticism, most notably defended by Carneades and Arcesilaus, which predominated in the Platonic Academy for almost two centuries.³ They were specialized in refutation without propagating any positive doctrine of their own.

After the ancient philosophical era but before the modern philosophical era, a number of Medieval philosophers also engaged with epistemological questions at length. Most notable among the Medievals for their contributions to epistemology were Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, and William of Ockham. In the Islamic epistemology Islamic Golden Age which was booming prior to the Age of Enlightenment in Europe. One of the most prominent and influential philosophers, theologians, jurists, logicians and mystics Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali was seeking to know what we can be certain about: what is true knowledge and not just opinion? To accomplish this goal, he would first consider what kinds of things we can know. This involves a study of epistemology, the theory of knowledge.⁴

¹ John Locke, “Introduction,” *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

² Paul K. Moser, *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 101.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

Epistemology largely came to the fore in philosophy during the early modern period, which historians of philosophy traditionally divide up into a dispute between empiricists (including Francis Bacon, John Locke, David Hume, and George Berkeley) and rationalists (including René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, and Gottfried Leibniz). The debate between them has often been framed using the question of whether knowledge comes primarily from sensory experience (empiricism), or whether a significant portion of our knowledge is derived entirely from our faculty of reason (rationalism). According to some scholars, this dispute was resolved in the late 18th century by Immanuel Kant, whose transcendental idealism famously made room for the view that “though all our knowledge begins with experience, it by no means follows that all [knowledge] arises out of experience.”⁵

There are a number of different methods that contemporary scholars use when trying to understand the relationship between past epistemology and contemporary epistemology. One of the most contentious questions is this: Should we assume that the problems of epistemology are perennial, and that trying to reconstruct and evaluate Plato’s or Hume’s or Kant’s arguments is meaningful for current debates, too?⁶ Similarly, there is also a question of whether contemporary philosophers should aim to *rationaly reconstruct and evaluate* historical views in epistemology, or to *merely describe* them.⁷ Barry Stroud claims that doing epistemology competently requires the historical study of past attempts to find philosophical understanding of the nature and scope of human knowledge.⁸ He argues that since inquiry may progress over time, we may not realize how different the questions that contemporary epistemologists ask, are questions asked at various different points in the history of philosophy.

1.2 What is Epistemology?

The term “epistemology” comes from the Greek words *episteme* and *logos*. While *episteme* can be translated as knowledge, understanding or acquaintance, *logos* can be translated as account, argument or reason. Each of these different translations captures some facet of the meaning of these Greek terms as well as a different facet of epistemology itself.

In different parts of its history, different facets of epistemology have attracted attention.⁹ Plato’s epistemology is an attempt to understand what it is to know, and how knowledge (unlike mere true opinion) is attributed to the knower. Aristotle’s epistemology delimits what we can know and how we can know. Similarly, John Locke’s epistemology is an attempt to understand the operations of human understanding. Immanuel Kant’s epistemology attempts to understand the

⁵ Thomas Sturm, “Historical Epistemology or History of Epistemology? The Case of the Relation Between Perception and Judgment,” *Erkenntnis* 75(3), 304.

⁶ John Bengson and Marc A. Moffett (eds.), *Essays on Knowledge, Mind, and Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14-15.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ see Mathew Benton, “Epistemology Personalized,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*. 67(269), (2011), 813.

⁹ M. steup and Ram Nata, “Epistemology,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2020), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).
uRL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/>.

conditions of the possibility of human understanding, while that of Russell is an attempt to understand how modern science could be justified by appeal to sensory experience. Much recent work in epistemology is an attempt to understanding the justification for our knowledge claims. This is sometimes affected by interest.....In any case epistemology tries to understand our cognitive success or cognitive failure.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge. Epistemologists study the nature, origin, and scope of knowledge, epistemic justification, the rationality of belief, and various related issues. Epistemology is considered a major subfield of philosophy, along with other major subfields such as ethics, logic, and metaphysics.

Problems in epistemology are generally clustered around four core areas:

1. The philosophical analysis of the nature of knowledge and the conditions required for a belief to constitute knowledge, such as truth and justification.
2. Potential sources of knowledge and justified belief, such as perception, reason, memory, and testimony.
3. The structure of a body of knowledge or justified belief, including whether all justified beliefs must be derived from justified foundational beliefs or whether justification requires only a coherent set of beliefs.
4. Philosophical skepticism, which questions the possibility of knowledge, and related problems, such as whether skepticism poses a threat to our ordinary knowledge claims and whether it is possible to refute skeptical arguments.

In all these, epistemology aims to answer questions such as “What do we know?”, “What does it mean to say that we know something?”, “What makes justified beliefs justified?”, and “How do we know that we know?”

1.3 Etymology

The word *epistemology* is derived from the ancient Greek *epistēmē*, meaning “knowledge”, and the suffix *-logia*, meaning “logical discourse” (derived from the Greek word *logos* meaning “discourse”).¹⁰ The appearance of the word in English was predated by the German term *Wissenschaftslehre* (literally, theory of science), which was introduced by philosophers Johann Fichte and Bernard Bolzano in the late 18th century. The word “epistemology” first appeared in 1847, in a review in New York’s *Eclectic Magazine*. It was first used as a translation of the word *Wissenschaftslehre* as it appears in a philosophical novel by German author Jean Paul. The title of one of the principal works of Fichte is ‘*Wissenschaftslehre*,’ which is now rendered *epistemology*.¹¹

¹⁰“Epistemology,” Oxford English Dictionary (3rd ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2014).

¹¹Anonymous, “Jean-Paul Frederich Richter,” *The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science and Art*. 12, (1847), 317.

The word "epistemology" was properly introduced into Anglophone philosophical literature by Scottish philosopher James Frederick Ferrier in 1854, who used it in his *Institutes of Metaphysics*:

This section of the science is properly termed the Epistemology—the doctrine or theory of knowing, just as ontology is the science of being... It answers the general question, ‘What is knowing and the known?’—or more shortly, ‘What is knowledge?’

It is important to note that the French term *épistémologie* is used with a different and far narrower meaning than the English term “epistemology”, being used by French philosophers to refer solely to philosophy of science. For instance, Émile Meyerson opened his *Identity and Reality*, written in 1908, with the remark that the word is becoming current as equivalent to “the philosophy of the sciences.”¹²

¹² Cf. Wal Suchting, “Epistemology,” *Historical Materialism*, (2018), 331.