

CHAPTER FIVE

THE NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION

5.1 Internalism and Externalism

A central debate about the nature of justification is a debate between epistemological externalists on the one hand and epistemological internalists on the other. While epistemic externalism first arose in attempts to overcome the Gettier problem, it has flourished in the time since as an alternative way of conceiving of epistemic justification. The initial development of epistemic externalism is often attributed to Alvin Goldman, although numerous other philosophers have worked on the topic in the time since.⁶⁶

Externalists hold that factors deemed external meaning outside of the psychological states of those who gain knowledge, can be conditions of justification. For example, an externalist response to the Gettier problem is to say that for a justified true belief to count as knowledge, there must be a link or dependency between the belief and the state of the external world. Usually, this is understood to be a causal link. Such causation, to the extent that it is outside the mind, would count as an external, knowledge-yielding condition. Internalists, on the other hand, assert that all knowledge-yielding conditions are within the psychological states of those who gain knowledge.

Though unfamiliar with the internalist/externalist debate himself, many point to René Descartes as an early example of the internalist path to justification. He wrote that because the only method by which we perceive the external world is through our senses, and that, because the senses are not infallible, we should not consider our concept of knowledge infallible. The only way to find anything that could be described as "indubitably true", he advocates, would be to see things "clearly and distinctly."⁶⁷ He argued that if there is an omnipotent, good being who made the world, then it's reasonable to believe that people are made with the ability to know. However, this does not mean that man's ability to know is perfect. God gave man the ability to know but not with omniscience. Descartes said that man must use his capacities for knowledge correctly and carefully through methodological doubt.⁶⁸

The dictum "Cogito ergo sum" (I think, therefore I am) is also commonly associated with Descartes' theory. In his own methodological doubt—doubting everything he previously knew so he could start from a blank slate—the first thing that he could not logically bring himself to doubt was his own existence: "I do not exist" would be a contradiction in terms. The act of saying that one does not exist assumes that someone must be making the statement in the first place. Descartes could doubt his senses, his body, and the world around him—but he could not deny his own existence, because he was able to doubt and must exist to manifest that doubt. Even if some "evil genius" were deceiving him, he would have to exist to be deceived. This one

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Alan H. Goldman, "Appearing as Irreducible in Perception." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 37(2), 147.

⁶⁸ Richard L. Kirkham, *Mind*, 93 (372), (1984), 503.

sure point provided him with what he called his Archimedean point, in order to further develop his foundation for knowledge. Simply put, Descartes' epistemological justification depended on his indubitable belief in his own existence and his clear and distinct knowledge of God.⁶⁹

5.2 Causal theory and naturalized epistemology

In an earlier paper that predates his development of reliabilism, Alvin Goldman writes in his "Causal Theory of Knowing" that knowledge requires a causal link between the truth of a proposition and the belief in that proposition.⁷⁰ A similar view has also been defended by Hilary Kornblith in *Knowledge and its Place in Nature*, although his view is meant to capture an empirical scientific conception of knowledge, not an analysis of the everyday concept "knowledge."⁷¹ Kornblith, in turn, takes himself to be elaborating on the naturalized epistemology framework first suggested by W.V.O. Quine.

5.3 The Value Problem (Knowledge v Belief)

We generally assume that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. If so, what is the explanation? A formulation of the value problem in epistemology first occurs in Plato's *Meno*. Socrates points out to Meno that a man who knew the way to Larissa could lead others there correctly. But so, too, could a man who had true beliefs about how to get there, even if he had not gone there or had any knowledge of Larissa. Socrates says that it seems that both knowledge and true opinion can guide action. Meno then wonders why knowledge is valued more than true belief and why knowledge and true belief are different. Socrates responds that knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief because it is tethered or justified. Justification, or working out the reason for a true belief, locks down true belief.⁷²

The problem is to identify what (if anything) makes knowledge more valuable than mere true belief, or that makes knowledge more valuable than a mere minimal conjunction of its components, such as justification, safety, sensitivity, statistical likelihood, and anti-Gettier conditions, on a particular analysis of knowledge that conceives of knowledge as divided into components (to which knowledge-first epistemological theories, which posit knowledge as fundamental, are notable exceptions).⁷³ The value problem re-emerged in the philosophical literature on epistemology in the twenty-first century following the rise of virtue epistemology in the 1980s, partly because of the obvious link to the concept of value in ethics.⁷⁴

5.4 Virtue Epistemology: A Solution to the Value Problem

⁶⁹"Epistemic Contextualism," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved 20 October 2021.

⁷⁰ Alvin I. Goldman & E.J. Olsson, E.J. "Reliabilism and the Value of Knowledge." In Haddock, A., Millar, A. & Pritchard, D. (eds.). *Epistemic Value* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 24.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ See Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).

In contemporary philosophy, epistemologists have defended virtue epistemology as a solution to the value problem. They argue that epistemology should also evaluate the “properties” of people as epistemic agents (i.e. intellectual virtues), rather than merely the properties of propositions and propositional mental attitudes.

The value problem has been presented as an argument against epistemic reliabilism. Zagzebski, for instance, analogizes the value of knowledge to the value of espresso produced by an espresso maker: “The liquid in this cup is not improved by the fact that it comes from a reliable espresso maker. If the espresso tastes good, it makes no difference if it comes from an unreliable machine.”⁷⁵ For Zagzebski, the value of knowledge deflates to the value of mere true belief. She assumes that reliability in itself has no value or disvalue, but Goldman and Olsson disagree. They point out that Zagzebski’s conclusion rests on the assumption of veritism: all that matters is the acquisition of true belief.⁷⁶ To the contrary, they argue that a reliable process for acquiring a true belief adds value to the mere true belief by making it more likely that future beliefs of a similar kind will be true. By analogy, having a reliable espresso maker that produced a good cup of espresso would be more valuable than having an unreliable one that luckily produced a good cup because the reliable one would more likely produce good future cups compared to the unreliable one.

The value problem is important to assessing the adequacy of theories of knowledge that conceive of knowledge as consisting of true belief and other components. According to Kvanvig, an adequate account of knowledge should resist counterexamples and allow an explanation of the value of knowledge over mere true belief. Should a theory of knowledge fail to do so, it would prove inadequate.⁷⁷

One of the more influential responses to the problem is that knowledge is not particularly valuable and is not what ought to be the main focus of epistemology. Instead, epistemologists ought to focus on other mental states, such as understanding.⁷⁸ Advocates of virtue epistemology have argued that the value of knowledge comes from an internal relationship between the knower and the mental state of believing.⁷⁹

5.5 Cognitive Success vis a vis Epistemic Harms

The question, therefore, arises, what makes it the case that something counts as a form of cognitive success? For instance, why think that knowing the school vice chancellor is a cognitive success, rather than any other cognitive state? Not every cognitive state enjoys cognitive success. Knowing, understanding, mastering, etc, are all cognitive successes. But confidence in a

⁷⁵“The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Retrieved October 29, 2021.

⁷⁶ Cf. G. Russell, *Truth in Virtue of Meaning: A Defence of the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁷⁷ Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*.

⁷⁸ Edward N. Zalta (ed.). “Foundational Theories of Epistemic Justification,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed October, 29, 2021.

⁷⁹ Jonathan L. Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*.

proposition, for instance, is not a cognitive success in and of itself. Inasmuch as an agent can hold confidence in the right circumstances and for the right reasons (in which case, it is partly constitutive of an agent's cognitive success), it is also possible that then agent can hold confidence in the wrong circumstance and for the wrong reasons. One can even be confident that what is not, is. What makes the difference?

The idea of cognitive success can be explained in three ways, namely contractualism, consequentialism, or constitutivism. The contractualists say that a particular cognitive state counts as a kind of success because counting it as such severs certain widely held practical interest. For instance, we describe a person as 'knowing' something as a way of showing that his testimony with respect to that thing is to be trusted.⁸⁰ The consequentialist says that a particular cognitive state counts as a success because it tends to constitute or to promote some important benefit. According to some consequentialists, the benefit in question is that of having true beliefs and lacking false beliefs.⁸¹ According to others, it is the benefit of having a comprehensive understanding of reality. For others still, it is a benefit that I not narrowly epistemic, like living a good life. Lastly, the constitutivists would say that a particular cognitive state counts as a success if it is the constitutive aim of some feature of our lives to achieve that aim.⁸² For instance, the constitutivist might say that knowledge is a kind of cognitive success by virtue of being the constitutive aim of all human activity.

The above three answers will depict three different kinds of cognitive success. Each of the answer is correct for a particular kind of success. Consider, for example, the difference between the kind of success involved in having a state that is fitting (like holding a belief knowledgeable), and the kind of success involved in having a state that is valuable (like holding a belief the holding of which is beneficial). An example of the former would be: the capital of Nigeria is Abuja, while that of the later would be: God exists. Perhaps the constitutivist can explain the former kind of success better than the consequentialist can, but the consequentialist can explain the latter kind of success better than the constitutivist can. Of course, if and when the demands of these different kinds of success conflict, the agent will face the question of how to proceed. Much recent work in epistemology has attempted to dress the question.⁸³

Now, these different ways of understanding cognitive success each gives rise to a different understanding of the diverse ways in which cognitive success can be obstructed, and so a different understanding of the ways in which an agent may be harmed by such obstructions. Obstructing an agent's cognitive success constitutes an epistemic harm. In a situation in which

⁸⁰ E. Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature : An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 64-65.

⁸¹ L. BonJour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). R. Audi, *The Structure of Justification*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

⁸² C. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

⁸³ M. McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*, New York: Routledge, 2015), and S. Rinard, "No Exception for Belief," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 94(1) (2017a), 121.

false testimony would be an epistemic harm, dishonest testimony would be an epistemic wrong. Insinuation, inattention, and false indoctrination can all constitute epistemic harms as each of them can obstruct, and sometimes wrongly obstruct an agent's cognitive success.

For example, one can mislead you into drawing false conclusions, even if what one says is true. For instance, when I say, "the victims were killed by a herdsman," even if what I say is literally true, it can mislead the hearer into thinking that the killer's being a herdsman is a relevant explanation to his crime. Similarly, one can harm you by getting you to think poorly of your own capacity to understand a subject by refusing to pay attention to what you think or say. Also, one can harm you by indoctrinating you in a view so strong that you lose the ability to consider alternative views.

The epistemic harms we just mentioned occur frequently in the course of daily life, and they are typically constituted by some particular acts that we perform, such as lending greater credence to the word of a man over that of a woman, or using rhetorical devices to insinuate things that one does not know to be true. Recent work in feminist epistemology has helped us to gain an appreciation of how widespread this phenomenon is.⁸⁴

Sometimes the harm might even be built into our practice of epistemic appraisal perhaps even a tendency that is somehow constitutive of that very practice. Suppose, for instance, that it is constitutive of our practice of epistemic appraisal to count someone as knowing a fact or being knowledgeable only if he possesses a doctorate degree from a recognized academic institution. Whatever may be said in favour of our practice's having such a feature, one of its effects is clear: those individuals who are most excellently knowledgeable with regard to certain facts will find that the deliverance of their unique cognitive sensitivities is not counted as knowledge. And so, these same individuals will not be granted the same authority or credibility as the doctorate degree holders, even when these latter are less knowledgeable and less cognitively sensitive to the range of facts in question.

5.6 Opinion and Knowledge

In all senses of knowledge and opinion, a belief justifiably known to be true is knowledge while a belief not known to be true is opinion. In this case, all knowledge is true but not all opinions are true. Every proposition known to be true (knowledge) is believed to be true; but not every proposition believed to be true (opinion) is known to be true. Each of a person's beliefs, whether knowledge or opinion, is the end result of a particular thought process, with a conclusive act – judgment that something is the case.

Platonic epistemology holds that knowledge of ideas is innate, so that learning is the development of ideas buried deep in the soul, often under the midwife-like guidance of an interrogator. In several dialogues by Plato, the character Socrates presents the view that each soul

⁸⁴ see M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); K. Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression", *Social Epistemology*, 28(2), (2014), 115.

existed before birth with the Form of the Good and a perfect knowledge of ideas. Thus, when an idea is “learned” it is actually just “recalled.”⁸⁵

Plato wished to know the difference between knowledge and opinion. His idea is that something needs to be added to opinion to get knowledge. That something else is “truth,” “justification,” “reliability,” etc. Plato, thus, drew a sharp distinction between knowledge, which is certain, and mere true opinion, which is not certain. According to him, opinions derive from the shifting world of sensation; knowledge derives from the world of timeless Forms or essences. In the republic, these concepts were illustrated using the metaphor of the sun, the analogy of the divided line, and the allegory of the cave.

5.6.1 Metaphor of the Sun

In the Republic (507b-509c) Plato’s Socrates uses the sun as a metaphor for the source of “intellectual illumination,” which he held to be *The Form of the Good*. It starts with the eye, which Socrates says is unusual among the sense organs in that it needs a medium, namely light, in order to operate. The strongest and best source of light is the sun; with it, we can discern objects clearly. Analogously for intelligible objects, *The Form of the Good*, is necessary in order to understand any particular thing. Thus, if we attempt to understand why things are as they are, and what general categories can be used to understand various particulars around us, without reference to any forms (universals) we will fail completely. By contrast, the domain where truth and reality shine resplendent is none other than Plato’s world of forms – illustrated by the highest of the forms, that of the good. It is only here that knowledge (and not opinion) consists.

5.6.2 The Divided Line

In Plato’s republic, Book VI, the divided line has two parts that represent the intelligible world and the smaller visible world. Each of those two parts is divided, the segments within the intelligible world represent higher and lower forms and the segments within the visible world represent ordinary visible objects and their shadows, reflections, and other representations. The line segments are unequal and their lengths represent their comparative clearness and obscurity and their comparative reality and truth, as well as whether we have knowledge or instead mere opinion of the object

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