

What Is Epistemology?

A Brief Introduction to the Topic

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I suppose many are in the position of knowing that epistemology is a branch of philosophy, but not knowing anything beyond that. (Well, not knowing anything further about what epistemology is -- let's not get into general skepticism just yet!) The standard very short answer to our title question is that epistemology is the **theory of knowledge**. In fact, so far as I can tell, "epistemology" and "theory of knowledge" are used interchangeably in, for instance, college course catalogues. Epistemology, then, is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions concerning the nature, scope, and sources of knowledge. In what follows, I'll briefly describe a few of the issues epistemologists deal with. That should give you a bit better idea of what epistemology is, and, for those considering taking an epistemology class, what to expect from such a class. For those interested in further reading, there are links at the bottom of this page to articles that are introductory in nature (mostly from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, a great on-line resource) on particular topics in epistemology.

1. Under what Conditions Does One Know?: The Analysis of Knowledge.

Since epistemology is the theory of knowledge, a central question of the area is: Under what conditions does a subject know something to be the case? Most general epistemology classes (as opposed to specialized advanced courses that zero in on a particular epistemological topic) spend at least some time on this question, and many begin with it.

A very important paper on this topic -- perhaps the most commonly assigned paper in epistemology classes -- is Edmund Gettier's short classic, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" (*Analysis* 23 (1963): 121-123 [in the journal *Analysis*, volume 23, published in the year 1963, on pages 121-123]), available on-line at <<http://www.ditext.com/gettier/gettier.html>>. Gettier's target is an initially tempting account of knowledge: the "JTB" account, as it's often called, which analyzes knowledge as justified t rue belief. According to such an account, a subject S knows that P if and only if (Gettier uses the common philosophical abbreviation of IFF for "if

and only if"):

1. P is true,
2. S believes that P, and
3. S is justified in believing that P.

According to this account, then, you know that it's raining outside, for example, if and only if it is true that it's raining outside, and you believe that it's raining outside, and you are justified in so believing. To refute such accounts, Gettier advanced two examples, each of which involve (or at least intuitively seem to involve) instances of justified true belief that nonetheless fail to be instances of knowledge.

One could try to maintain the JTB account in the face of Gettier's cases either by arguing (against appearances) that the true beliefs in question in these examples are not really justified, or by maintaining (again against initial appearances) that the subjects in the examples really do know the propositions in question. But most epistemologists have accepted that Gettier's cases are genuine counter-examples to the JTB theory -- they are genuine examples of situations in which the questions "Does S know that P?" and "Does S have a justified true belief that P?" get different answers, and thus refute the JTB account of knowledge.

Gettier's paper spawned an explosion of philosophical literature aimed at producing an acceptable account of knowledge, either by modifying the JTB account by adding further conditions to it, or by replacing the third, justification, condition with one or more other conditions. Many new accounts were proposed, only to be subjected to new counter-examples -- examples which refute the account in question either by showing how a subject can know something despite failing to meet the conditions the account proposes, or by showing how a subject can fail to know something even though she does meet the conditions proposed. Often, still more sophisticated accounts were proposed to handle the new examples, only to crash on the rocks of still more sophisticated counter-examples. (For discussion of many examples of the analyses in question, and of some of the troubles they run into, see Robert Shope's book, *The Analysis of Knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 1983).) Many epistemologists grew tired of the game, and despaired of coming up with an account of knowledge that could survive this process. A widely discussed topic has been whether and how the methodology of testing philosophical accounts against examples (a methodology that is practiced in many areas of philosophy besides epistemology) can be profitably pursued, and the "post-Gettier" literature on the analysis of knowledge has been used as exhibit A of this methodology in action.

[For more introductory material on this topic, see Matthias Steup's *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article, ["The Analysis of Knowledge"](#).]

2. Justification and Other Epistemic Concepts.

As the above discussion shows, one issue that arises in discussions of whether and when subjects know something is whether and when they are justified in believing things, and the justification of beliefs is a standard topic in epistemology.

Epistemology also concerns itself with other, closely related concepts. Some examples: When is a subject rational in believing something? When are you certain of something? When do you know for certain that something is the case? When is something doubtful, for a subject, or not? When is something possible (in an epistemic sense of "possible") -- under what conditions is a belief possibly false from its subject's point of view? When is a belief adequately supported by one's evidence? (And what constitutes our evidence for our beliefs, and when does a belief need to be supported by evidence in order to be rational?) All of these are epistemological topics in their own right, of interest beyond what contribution an understanding of these concepts might make in a successful account of knowledge.

3. What Do We Know?: Skepticism.

As one would expect, another central question in the theory of knowledge is: What do we know? What is the scope or extent of our knowledge? This question, of course, is closely related to the question, addressed above in section 1, of what it takes to know something.

Pessimistic accounts of the scope of our knowledge have it that we know less than we think we know; radically pessimistic accounts have it that we know very little, or perhaps even nothing! Though radical, such skeptical accounts of the scope of our knowledge have been the center of much philosophical attention, both historically and in recent epistemological work. Usually, skepticism is something philosophers attack and try to overcome; occasionally, it is defended. The attention paid here is in part due to the presence of powerful skeptical arguments that threaten to show that skeptical assessments of the scope of our knowledge are actually correct. A central epistemological obsession has been showing what is wrong with these skeptical arguments -- or, occasionally, arguing that there's nothing wrong with them.

A skeptical thesis is typically a claim that the beliefs in a certain range lack a certain status. In addition, then, to varying in their scope -- which specifies the range of beliefs being targeted -- skeptical theses, and the arguments used to establish them, also differ in their force -- which specifies precisely what lack the skeptic alleges befalls the targeted beliefs. Skepticism, then, isn't limited to pessimistic accounts of the extent of our knowledge; they can be views on which any of the designations discussed above in section 2 surprisingly fail to apply to a wide range of our beliefs.