WHAT ARE EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACHES?

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Annotation: Epistemology is the study of the nature of knowledge, justification, and the rationality of belief. Much debate in epistemology centers on four areas: (1) the philosophical analysis of the nature of knowledge and how it relates to such concepts as truth, belief, and justification, (2) various problems of skepticism, (3) the sources and scope of knowledge and justified belief, and (4) the criteria for knowledge and justification.

Key words: epistemology, knowledge, truth, skepticism, belief.

Epistemology addresses such questions as: «What makes justified beliefs justified?», «What does it mean to say that we know something?»,[4] and fundamentally «How do we know that we know?».

Epistemology, the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. The term is derived from the Greek ἐπιστήμη (“knowledge”) and logos (“reason”), and accordingly the field is sometimes referred to as the theory of knowledge. Epistemology has a long history within Western philosophy, beginning with the ancient Greeks and continuing to the present. Along with metaphysics, logic, and ethics, it is one of the four main branches of philosophy, and nearly every great philosopher has contributed to it.

The term “epistemology” comes from the Greek ἐπιστήμη, meaning “knowledge”, and ὁ λογός, meaning, roughly, “study, or science, of”. ὁ λόγος is the root of all terms ending in -ology – such as psychology, anthropology – and of logic, and has many other related meanings.

The word “knowledge” and its cognates are used in a variety of ways. One common use of the word “know” is as an expression of psychological conviction. For instance, we might hear someone say, «I just knew it wouldn't rain, but then it did.» While this may be an appropriate usage, philosophers tend to use the word “know” in a factive sense, so that one cannot know something that is not the case.

Even if we restrict ourselves to factive usages, there are still multiple senses of «knowledge,» and so we need to distinguish between them. One kind of knowledge is procedural knowledge, sometimes called competence or «know-how:» for example, one can know how to ride a bicycle, or one can know how to drive from Washington, D.C. to New York. Another kind of knowledge is acquaintance knowledge or familiarity; for instance, one can know the department chairperson, or one can know Philadelphia.

Epistemologists typically do not focus on procedural or acquaintance knowledge, however, instead preferring to focus on propositional knowledge. A proposition is something which can be expressed by a declarative sentence, and which purports to describe a fact or a state of affairs, such as «Dogs are mammals,» «2+2=7,» «It is wrong to murder innocent people for fun.» (Note that a proposition may be true or false; that is, it need not actually express a fact.) Propositional knowledge, then, can be called knowledge-that; statements of propositional knowledge (or the lack thereof) are properly expressed using «that»-clauses, such as «He knows that Houston is in Texas,» or «She does not know that the square root of 81 is 9.» In what follows, we will be concerned only with propositional knowledge.

Propositional knowledge, obviously, encompasses knowledge about a wide range of matters: scientific knowledge, geographical knowledge, mathematical knowledge, self-
knowledge, and knowledge about any field of study whatever. Any truth might, in principle, be knowable, although there might be unknowable truths. One goal of epistemology is to determine the criteria for knowledge so that we can know what can or cannot be known, in other words, the study of epistemology fundamentally includes the study of meta-epistemology (what we can know about knowledge itself).

The studies made of philosophy and the history of philosophy are countless. It is not the intention of this section to present a long, comprehensive view of the different theories, but to present the bases for the position defended in this paper. One could argue that there are main approaches in traditional epistemology. The first has its origins in Plato and is based on the idea that knowledge exists independently of empirical reality. Descartes would be in line with this position too (see e.g. Markie, 1998; Garber, 1998).

The second is referred to as the empiricist approach. Here Aristotle is the main figure and he contends that knowledge is created through experience. And finally a third approach, mainly represented by Kant, which would be placed between the two previous ones, holds that knowledge is a combination of experience and inner capacities.

This is obviously an oversimplification of the approaches, reducing them to some specific characteristics that make them similar. A deeper analysis would be needed in order to fully understand the work of the different authors presented, such as Plato, Aristotle and Kant, but here only few specific aspects of their theories are considered.

References:

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