
THE THEORY OF
EPISTEMIC RATIONALITY

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INTRODUCTION

What is epistemology? This question is no easier to answer than comparable questions about other branches of philosophy. No doubt an interesting and perhaps even coherent story can be told concerning why all of the following philosophers have been regarded as doing epistemology: Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Zeno, Plotinus, Augustine, Aquinas, Ockham, Descartes, Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Reid, Kant, Mill, Hegel, Bradley, Husserl, James, Peirce, Dewey, Moore, Russell, Lewis, Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ryle, Quine, and Chisholm. Even so, it would not be surprising to find that the projects of these philosophers, including the parts that are most apt to be deemed epistemological, are different in important ways. On the contrary, it would be surprising if they were not different; it would be surprising, for example, if Quine's epistemology were not a somewhat different kind of account—one that is put forth as an answer to a different question—than that found in, say, Aquinas, and in turn it would be surprising if Aquinas' epistemology were not a somewhat different kind of account than that found in Descartes'. Many different kinds of work, sometimes only subtly different but sometimes almost startlingly different, can be done under the name of epistemology.

I mention this for a reason. This book is presented as one in epistemology, and yet some of the notions most closely associated with epistemology are pretty much ignored. I say little about the notion of justification and little about the notion of warrant, nor do I devote much effort to discussing the notion of knowledge. What I do say quite a lot about is the notion of epistemic rationality. I try to describe in some detail what is involved in it being epistemically rational for someone to believe some claim (whether or not he in fact believes it).

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Of course, it may well be that once this notion is understood, it can be used to help us understand other epistemic notions—justification, warrant, knowledge, evidence, and information, as well as others. Indeed, I will make a number of suggestions concerning how this might be done. Be this as it may, this is first and foremost a work that is concerned not with knowledge or justification or warrant or some other epistemic notion but rather with epistemic rationality. In particular, it is a work in which I seek to articulate a general conception of epistemic rationality; in so doing, I try to identify the kind of rationality that is the subject of *the* theory of epistemic rationality (hence the title). I also propose *a* theory of epistemic rationality—that is, a specific account of this kind of rationality.

Why might one be interested in such an account? A full answer to this question cannot be given before articulating a general conception of epistemic rationality, but at least a preliminary answer can be sketched now. One might be interested in such an account because one is interested in understanding what it is rational for an individual to believe insofar as he has the goal of having true beliefs and not having false beliefs. It is natural for anyone with such interests to be interested in understanding epistemic rationality.

However, insofar as our interest in epistemic rationality is motivated by such a concern, it is at least tempting to adopt a conception of epistemic rationality that I will be at considerable pains to disavow, a conception implying that in doing epistemology one is to describe rules (or principles, or methods) of belief acquisition whose use ensures that we will not be fooled, or at least not frequently fooled, into believing what is false. The idea, in other words, is to look for rules (principles, methods) of belief acquisition that if followed will guarantee that our beliefs are mostly true.

The efforts of epistemologists who have found this conception attractive have met with little success. The rules (principles, methods) of rational belief acquisition they have proposed have tended to be vulnerable to the following trilemma: Either they are insufficiently strict, in which case they fail to rule out the possibility that even if we are epistemically rational we might fall into massive error, or they have skeptical implications, in that they imply that little of what we believe is epistemically rational for us to believe, or they are not sufficiently fundamental, in that the rules make epistemic rationality a function of what is true without providing more fundamental criteria to distinguish what is true from what is false (for example, “it is epistemically rational to believe those claims that reliable rules of belief acquisition recommend”). Indeed, the failure of the efforts of

such epistemologists has prompted in some quarters a deep pessimism about epistemology; it has prompted the view that perhaps it is best to abandon epistemology altogether.

In contrast to such pessimism, my approach recommends that it is not epistemology that is to be abandoned, but rather a certain traditional and pervasive conception of epistemology, a conception that insists upon an excessively intimate link between what is epistemically rational and what is true. The present work properly can be viewed as an extended defense of a conception of epistemic rationality and of the epistemological enterprise that is very different from this traditional conception.