

## **EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE**

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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. 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? ».

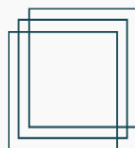
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**Epistemology**, the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. The term is derived from the Greek **epistēmē** (“knowledge”) and **logos** (“reason”), and accordingly the field is sometimes referred to as the theory 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 «episteme», meaning «knowledge», and «logos», meaning, roughly, «study, or science, of». «Logos» 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. (This point is discussed at greater length in section 2b below.)

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.

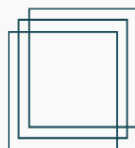
Propositional knowledge, obviously, encompasses knowledge about a wide range of matters: scientific knowledge, geographical knowledge, mathematical knowledge, self-knowledge, and knowledge about any field of study whatever. Any truth might, in principle, be knowable, although there might be unknowable 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.

More recently, the field of psychology has made some interesting contributions to the field of epistemology. Three main approaches have been proposed in classical epistemology, and similarly, three main approaches to psychology are presented: (1) psychology of the inner mental world, corresponding to the epistemology of Plato and Descartes, (2) behaviorist psychology, corresponding to traditional empiricism, and (3) constructivist psychology, related to the third approach to epistemological thought:



Critical rationalism. The first approach in psychology combined contributions from quite diverse authors: Wundt, Köhler and Freud. It is argued, however, that all of them share the conviction that the inner mental world is crucial in understanding the nature of knowledge. For them, knowledge is in one way or another generated mainly from the inside out. This approach to psychology, therefore, considers an inner world that is partially (if not totally) independent of empirical reality. Knowledge is mainly produced inside our heads from our own resources.

Behaviorism is a psychology tradition rooted in physiology. Behaviorism has its basis in Pavlov's work on classical conditioning (see e.g. Pavlov, 1904 or 1928). For Watson (1924, p. 5), behavioristic psychology attempts to formulate, through systematic observation and experimentation, the generalizations, laws and principles which underlie man's behavior.

Behaviorism is, therefore, not so much concerned with knowledge as it is with behavior. However, learning has a central role in their theories, since learning is the result of a successful training process, in which the conduct has been modified. Skinner, in his work with animals, especially pigeons, managed to "teach" them to get food by pressing a button. This "intelligent" behavior elicited the correct reinforcements – giving food – when the pigeon produced the correct response – pressing the button. Skinner (1953, p. 153) argues: The whole process of becoming competent in any field must be divided into a very large number of small steps, and reinforcement must be contingent upon the accomplishment of each step... By making each successive step as small as possible, the frequency of reinforcement can be raised to maximum, while the possible aversive consequences of being wrong are reduced to a minimum.

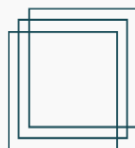
Behaviorists claim that the human mind cannot be studied; only its consequences, behavior, can be empirically studied (Saettler, 1990, p. 13). The different types of reinforcements that we receive will shape our behavior. Thinking is for the behaviorists "sub-vocal talking", just one type of "implicit habit responses" (Watson, 1924, p.15).

Knowledge is therefore external to the human mind; it occurs "from the outside-in"; it is the association of stimulus and responses (Shuell and Moran, 1996, p. 3340). Complex learning occurs through the operant conditioning of different sequences of responses.

### **Constructivism**

The third approach to psychology proposed here consists of an intermediate paradigm between the two previous approaches. It is the one that inspired the approach used in this paper, and it is, therefore, presented in more detail. Piaget is probably the most prominent exponent of this approach. He is one of the writers on education who is most frequently cited. His genetic epistemology has had, and still has, a great influence on curriculum design, educational theory and development psychology (Perner, 1996).

When confronting a new object or situation the script will assimilate or accommodate the new object or situation.



Piaget defines assimilation as “the incorporation of objects into patterns of behavior” (Piaget, 1950, p. 9); this means that the script grows, adding a new object (or situation) where the script will be functional. For example, assimilation occurs when a child is confronted with a pencil. The child can use the schema “grab and thrust” that s/he has already used with other similar objects. Using the schema will be successful, and therefore, the object “pencil” will be incorporated into the functional schema of “grab and thrust”.

Accommodation, on the other hand, occurs when the application of previously known schema to a given object is not successful; for example, the child cannot use the schema “grab and thrust” with a big ball. In this case, it is the “script” that changes, and the child will accommodate his/her schemata to the ball (see e.g. Flavel, 1963; Boeree, 2002).

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