3. Knowledge and Justification

We have been discussing the role of skeptical arguments in epistemology and have already made some progress in thinking about reasoning and belief. Although skepticism has in the past played a defining role in epistemology, addressing skepticism is still merely one project that epistemology faces. We can now step back a bit from this discussion in order to get a broader sense of contemporary theories of knowledge. In light of the myriad other developments in epistemology in the philosophical literature, perhaps the only genuinely uncontroversial thing that can be said of epistemology as whole is that it is an attempt to make sense of the possibility and limits of human intellectual achievement. Traditionally, achievements of the intellect are associated with knowledge. And since epistemology is “the theory of knowledge”, it would seem most naturally to have knowledge as its principal focus. But that is not entirely accurate. The theory of knowledge is an attempt to answer the question, “How do you know?”, but this is a question about how one knows, and not about knowing per se. In asking how a person knows something we are typically asking for her grounds for believing it. We want to know what justifies her in holding her belief. Thus epistemology has traditionally focused on epistemic justification more than on knowledge. Epistemology might better be called “doxastology”, which means the study of beliefs. The epistemic agent is viewed in epistemology as capable of representing the world through his or her beliefs and other mental states, where these are taken as thoughts that can be more or less rational to maintain. The philosophical status of mental states is a central issue in the philosophy of mind, though some philosophers have attempted to tackle both epistemological problems and philosophy of mind problems simultaneously. Later in this book, we will offer a longer discussion of our views on mental states like beliefs.

A justified belief is one that it is “epistemically permissible” to hold. Epistemic justification is a normative notion. It pertains to what you should or should not believe. But it is a uniquely epistemic normative notion. Epistemic permissibility must be distinguished from both moral and prudential permissibility. For example, because beliefs can have important consequences for the believer, it may be prudent to hold beliefs for which you have inadequate evidence. For instance, it is popularly alleged that lobsters do not feel pain when they are dunked alive into boiling water. It is extremely doubtful that anyone has good reason to believe that, but it may be prudentially rational to hold that belief because otherwise one would deprive oneself of the gustatory delight of eating boiled lobsters. Conversely, it may be imprudent to hold beliefs for which you have unimpeachable evidence. Consider Helen, who has

overwhelming evidence that her father is Jack the Ripper. It may be that if she admitted this to herself it would be psychologically crushing. In such cases people sometimes do not believe what the evidence overwhelmingly supports. That is prudentially reasonable but epistemically unreasonable. Thus epistemic reasonableness is not the same thing as prudential reasonableness. Epistemic reasonableness is also distinct from moral reasonableness. It is unclear whether moral considerations can be meaningfully applied to beliefs. If not, then epistemic justification is obviously distinct from moral permissibility. If belief does fall within the purview of morality then presumably a belief can be made morally impermissible, for example, if one were to promise someone never to think ill of him. But clearly the moral permissibility of such a belief is totally unrelated to its epistemic permissibility. This is not to say that it is inappropriate to ask whether certain beliefs are morally permissible. Our point is that this is an enterprise separate from epistemology. Epistemic justification is normative, but it must be distinguished from other familiar normative concepts.

Epistemic justification governs what you should or should not believe. Rules describing the circumstances under which it is epistemically permissible to hold beliefs are called *epistemic norms*. An important task of epistemology is that of describing the epistemic norms governing various kinds of belief. For instance, philosophers have sought accounts of the circumstances under which it is epistemically permissible to believe, on the basis of sense perception, that there are physical objects of different sorts standing in various spatial relations to the perceiver. In part, epistemologists have tried to elicit the nature of the epistemic norms governing this kind of knowledge by looking at skeptical arguments purporting to show that perceptual knowledge is impossible. We know, contrary to the skeptic, that perceptual knowledge is possible, and that allows us to draw conclusions about the epistemic norms governing perceptual knowledge. This will be a recurring theme throughout the book.

If the central question of epistemology concerns the justification of belief rather than knowledge, why is the discipline called “epistemology”? The explanation lies in the fact that there appear to be important connections between knowledge and justification. We have already noted that the question “How do you know?” can generally be construed as meaning “What justifies you in believing?”, but we can reasonably ask why it can be construed in that way. To answer this question, epistemologists have spent a great deal of time laboring over the connections between knowledge and justification. One way of thinking about the connection is to view knowledge as an achievement that can be further understood as having good reasons for a belief. If one’s reasons for a belief are good, then the belief is justified. So, it has been generally acknowledged that epistemic justification is a necessary condition for knowledge. Of course,

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6. Not quite all philosophers acknowledge this. There are a variety of strategies
putting the project this way immediately demands an account of what makes something a reason and what makes some reasons good, and that is just what a theory of justification aspires to.

Consensus is rare in philosophy, but from the early part of this century until 1963 it was almost universally agreed that knowledge was the same thing as justified true belief. That is, a person knows something, \( P \), if and only if (1) she believes it, (2) it is true, and (3) her belief is justified. But in 1963, Edmund Gettier published his seminal paper “Is justified true belief knowledge?” in which he showed to everyone’s astonishment that this identification is incorrect. He did this by presenting counterexamples. In one of his examples we consider Smith, who believes falsely but with good reason that Jones owns a Ford. Smith has no idea where Brown is, but he arbitrarily picks Barcelona and infers from the putative fact that Jones owns a Ford that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona. It happens by chance that Brown is in Barcelona, so this disjunction is true. Furthermore, as Smith has good reason to believe that Jones owns a Ford, he is justified in believing this disjunction. But as his evidence does not pertain to the true disjunct of the disjunction, we would not regard Smith as knowing that it is true that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona.

The general reaction to Gettier’s examples has been to concede that a fourth condition must be added to the analysis of “\( S \) knows that \( P \)”. The search for this fourth condition has become known as the Gettier problem. The Gettier problem is a seductive sort of problem, much as the problem of skepticism is seductive. When they first encountered it, most epistemologists were convinced that it must have a simple solution. Simple conditions were found that handled the original Gettier counterexamples, but new counterexamples emerged almost immediately. More and more complicated counterexamples were followed by more and more complicated fourth conditions. At the present time, the Gettier problem has become mired in complexity and few philosophers now expect it to have a simple solution. Nevertheless, having gotten hooked on the problem epistemologists are loath to let it go, so it remains a frequent topic in contemporary epistemology.

The Gettier problem has fundamentally altered the character of con-

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for detaching knowledge from justification. For accounts that attempt to analyze knowledge by a strategy where a belief must co-vary with the truth in a way that does not involve justification see Peter Unger (1967), Joseph Margolis (1973), Alvin Goldman (1976), David Armstrong (1973), and Robert Nozick (1981). Colin Radford (1966) inspired a debate on this topic by offering putative cases of knowledge where the epistemic agent is not justified because she does not believe that which she knows. For replies, see David Annis (1969), David Armstrong (1969), and Keith Lehrer (1968).

7. Remarkably, a counterexample to the traditional analysis can also be found in Bertrand Russell (1912), p. 132, but that went overlooked.

temporary epistemology. Many epistemologists now regard the Gettier problem as a central problem of epistemology since it poses a clear barrier to analyzing knowledge. It is our conviction, however, that this represents an important and lamentable shift in the focus of epistemology. Historically, the central topic of epistemology was epistemic justification rather than knowledge. Philosophers were more interested in how we know rather than what it is to know. Of course, this is in part because they thought that the latter question had an easy answer. The Gettier problem shows that the answer is not easy. The analysis of “S knows that P” is a fascinating problem, but it should be regarded as a side issue rather than as the central problem of epistemology. What the Gettier problem really shows is what a perverse concept knowledge is. One can do everything with complete epistemic propriety, and be right, and yet lack knowledge because of some accident about the way the world is. Why do we employ such a concept? For obvious reasons, we will often be interested in whether someone is right in some belief he or she holds, and we may be interested in whether the person is justified in his or her belief because that may be indicative of how reliable they are in their knowledge claims. But if we know that they are both right and justified, why should we have any further interest in whether they know? Clearly we often do, and why we do is an interesting puzzle, but it is not the sort of question that should be regarded as the founding question for an entire discipline. Epistemology was traditionally concerned with how rational cognition works in forming and updating our beliefs about the world, and that should once again be recognized as the central problem of epistemology and one of the main questions of philosophy. For this reason the Gettier problem is not discussed in this book. Its solution is not an essential part of the construction of an epistemological theory. On the contrary, we take an epistemological theory to be a theory about how it is possible to acquire various kinds of knowledge, and this is most basically a theory about epistemic justification.

It is useful to distinguish two potentially different concepts of epistemic justification. We have taken the fundamental problem of epistemology to be that of deciding what to believe. Epistemic justification, as we use the term, is concerned with this problem. Considerations of epistemic justification guide us in determining what to believe. We might call this the “procedural” sense of “justification”. Correlatively, epistemic norms are norms prescribing how to form beliefs. It is common in contemporary epistemology to find philosophers explaining instead that what they mean by “justification” is, roughly, “what turns true belief into knowledge”. That, of course, is not very clear. In any event, it must be emphasized that the topic of this book is procedural justification, not

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9. This is persuasively documented by Mark Kaplan (1985).
“what is required for knowledge”. This will be important at various stages of the argument where it is urged that particular theories could not play a procedural role.

4. Areas of Knowledge

We know many kinds of things, and there appear to be important differences between the ways we know them. We can subdivide knowledge into different “areas”, according to these epistemological differences. Knowledge based directly upon sense perception, or “perceptual knowledge”, comprises one area. Knowledge possessed by virtue of remembering previously acquired knowledge comprises another. Inductive generalizations comprise a third. Knowledge of other minds, a priori knowledge, and moral knowledge comprise other areas. Knowledge in different areas will share some common features but will also exhibit important differences.

4.1 Perceptual Knowledge

The problem of perception is that of explaining how perceptual knowledge is possible. We all agree that sense perception can lead to justified beliefs about the world around us. But the details remain obscure. The skeptical argument with which this chapter began can be regarded as an assault on the possibility of perceptual knowledge. It seems that our perceptual experience could be precisely what it is without the world being at all what it appears to be (we might be brains in vats!). How then is it possible to acquire knowledge of the material world by relying upon sense perception?

The focus of the present book is of “meta-epistemology”. That is, it is more concerned with describing and contrasting kinds of epistemological theories than it is with addressing specific epistemological problems. The broad categories of epistemological theories that will be discussed will be enumerated in the next section. But one way of contrasting theories is by comparing what they have to say about specific epistemological problems, and the sample problem to which we will return repeatedly is the problem of perception. More has been written in epistemology about perceptual knowledge than about any other kind of knowledge. This is partly because the psychological facts are clearer. Specifically, we know that such knowledge is acquired in response to the activation of our sense organs, the most important of which is vision. This enables us to formulate the problem of perception as that of explaining how we can acquire justified beliefs about the external world on the basis of the output of our sense organs. This seemingly unremarkable formulation contrasts sharply with the formulation of epistemological problems concerning some other areas of knowledge.