

## Is Epistemology Possible?

### 15.1 HEGEL

the charge that the enterprise of epistemology is impossible.

the argument from error

Arguments of the second sort claim that we cannot begin to construct a theory at all, because to do so involves some form of vicious circularity or the making of unjustifiable assumptions.

Hegel in *Phenomenology of Mind* **considers the charge** that

[to exist for us as object of knowledge of us versus to exist to it as ‘by itself’.]

in epistemology the task of knowledge is to examine itself rather than other things, and that this is impossible.

Knowledge is not itself an **object for us**, but the instrument with which we approach our objects or the medium through which they appear to us.

We cannot examine that medium itself, because it is always that by which we are related to our objects.

and to turn it into an object is to cause it to cease to be the relation in which we are interested.

**Hegel rejects it** because it involves notions such as those of an instrument or medium which have not yet been made clear.

He then reconstructs the problem in his own way.

we cannot start without a criterion. But if there is no (justified) criterion for us, we cannot even begin.

[‘K – C – J’ – a form of epistemic circularity]

Hegel begins his **resolution of the problem** –

Both sides of the distinction fall within the grasp of consciousness.

In epistemology we are comparing the object we are conscious of with our consciousness of it, but this does not mean that the enterprise is impossible.

[*for us* and *for itself* – both are phenomenal or we can say *for us*. what Hegel tempts to say, I think.]

*for us* – should, or fail to correspond with – *by itself* ?

Is “rearrangement of our K enterprise to fit with *things by itself*” – a way-out indeed?

Our knowledge here is that state of consciousness which best fits the criterion we are using. Even so, it failed to fit its object. And the criterion by which it failed to fit its object is **found by consciousness in the nature of the object**, not imposed arbitrarily from outside as was suggested before.

Altering our knowledge would mean changing our object; when knowledge and object fail to correspond, both collapse, and with them we lose the criterion which we were using to determine whether they correspond.

**Hegel's contradiction:** What has happened then is that at a certain level of consciousness what Hegel would call a contradiction has emerged.

Hegel calls it as **determinate negation**, which has a certain form. And by its form it drives us up from the contradiction to a new level, where we have a new object and a new enquiry.

Progression from one form of consciousness to another will continue until we reach a form where the distinction between the *object for us* and the *object in itself* collapses completely

This progression from one form of consciousness to another is the mark of Hegel's conception of 'phenomenology'.

It differs in two important ways from the approach we have taken hitherto.

First, it treats sceptical arguments not as a danger to be defused or rebutted, but as a source of discovery.

Second, epistemology for Hegel is possible, but only if it takes the route of progressing from one form of consciousness to the next.

Any form of epistemology that does not progress in this way (Kant's, for instance) is destroyed by the vicious circularity.

Appeal to that progression was the only means Hegel saw of solving the problem of the criterion and of overcoming the separation of the *in itself* and the *for us*.

## 15.2 CHISHOLM AND THE PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION

Certain types of knowledge, empirical and mathematical knowledge is possible.

There are other more dubious knowledge claims, for instance claims to moral or religious knowledge.

**Commonsense approach:** This is the 'common sense' approach which Chisholm's own theory of knowledge exemplifies.

Accepting that empirical knowledge is possible, and being persuaded by the regress argument that our theory must have some foundationalist structure, he simply writes a series of epistemic principles which have the desired effect. The justification of the principles is simply that they do have that effect; and we then accept their verdicts about the disputed examples.

**Critical approach:** An alternative approach is to adopt certain criteria at the outset, leaving it open which knowledge claims those criteria will eventually validate (if any).

For instance, we might set down as our criterion the claim that all knowledge be somehow derived from **sense experience**.

But it might turn out that we are unable to show how any interesting knowledge (for example, of unseen objects of **the past** or of **mathematical truth**) is derived from sense-experience and in that case we simply abandon those areas.

Both of these approaches involve making assumptions which they themselves provide no means of validating.

The common sense approach is manifestly an expression of philosophical prejudice, while the alternative 'criterial' approach is likely to hit on criteria at the outset with no chance of an explanation of what justifies our choice of these criteria rather than others.

It may be, of course, that the common sense approach leaves no room for philosophical scepticism. But since this is merely a matter of prejudice, it can hardly be claimed as an advantage.

Chisholm suggests that there is a way between the horns of this dilemma. This third approach he calls **critical cognitivism**.

Suppose that instead of **fixing on certain examples** (perceptual knowledge, memory knowledge, etc.) and insisting that our theory show that we do have such knowledge,

we instead agree in advance on certain '**sources**' of knowledge:  
(1) perception, (2) memory, (3) reason and (4) self-awareness, maybe.

When we come to consider a contested concept such as that of **ethical knowledge**, it may seem that we have only **two choices** –

Either we stick to our original list of sources and claim that since there is no further source there is no ethical knowledge, or we allow that there must be a further source (**intuition**, perhaps) in order to make ethical knowledge possible.

This is the original dilemma

Critical cognitivism – the third possibility.

The critical cognitivist allows that none of the sources is itself a source of ethical knowledge directly, but tries to show that what those sources provide us with serves to enable us to know ethical facts.

Critical cognitivism is a "**theory as a promissory note for a theory**".

To get any further we would want to know what it is for one thing to express another, what it is to see one thing as an expression of another, and whether there are different sorts of expression in different areas, for example in ethics and other minds.

Critical cognitivism seems to be concerned mainly with our approach to the disputed cases, particularly of moral or religious knowledge (perhaps knowledge of the future too).

But the problem of the criterion did not really concern our attitude to the disputed cases, but our attitude to the undisputed ones. The problem was that the initial selection of four sources of knowledge was nothing more than philosophical prejudice.

Hegel would think of an epistemology which started from the acceptance of the four sources as simply ludicrous (an uncritical cognitivism), both because it takes as its starting point something which nothing in the procedure offers a chance of validating.

If the distinction between different sources of knowledge is taken seriously as the beginning of a genuine theory of the mind and of cognition, it collapses in contradictions.

Each level of consciousness creates its own criteria, and analysis shows that it cannot satisfy the criteria so created. So if Hegel's problem is a real one, we can only conclude that Chisholm has not answered it.

### 5.3 QUINE AND THE NON-EXISTENCE OF THE FIRST PHILOSOPHY

The holism which results from Quine's acceptance of **Duhem's thesis** (p. 92) has among its consequences the abandoning of the **analytic/synthetic distinction**.

For Quine, there are no completely unrevisable sentences. Thus all sentences, in a way, count as synthetic; but some are more synthetic than others.

And this brand of **holism** forces us to abandon the hope of a *first philosophy*, a philosophical system which stands apart from, is independently justifiable, and adjudicates on the claims of the special sciences such as physics or, more mundanely, of sense-perception.

Philosophy (and epistemology, in particular) is continuous with or even part of natural science. It is not a peculiar investigation of concepts, nor a separable enquiry into the meanings of crucial words such as 'know.' or 'justify'. If there were a first philosophy, this would perhaps be its subject matter.

Instead, philosophy is only distinguished from other aspects of human enquiry by its generality; it tackles more general and broader questions than those investigated by the special sciences of physics and psychology.

On this Quinean approach, then, **philosophy is the study of science from within science**. But this seems to raise **problems of circularity**.

In studying science within science, the philosopher is not able to question the whole of science at once; rather he has to assume the general validity of scientific procedures and results if he is going to find reasons within science for questioning, and accepting or rejecting and replacing, particular aspects.

This is why Quine is so fond of **Neurath's parable of the mariner** who has to rebuild his boat while staying afloat in it. We have to keep the boat of science generally intact while we examine it and repair such parts as we find defective. We cannot take the boat into dry dock and get off it, nor can

we suppose that the discovery of contradictions within science could enable us to rise above science, leaving our boat on a Hegelian helicopter.

It looks as if, with the abandoning of a first philosophy simply recurs in a more vicious form. [Dancy]

One suggestion Quine makes is that the problem of circularity only arises within the philosophical tradition of the search for certainty and the attempt to deduce science from sense-data (Quine, 1969, pp. 83 -4).

[Dancy's criticism of Quine]

It is true that if we were attempting to deduce science from sense-data, we would be involved in a vicious circularity if we assumed science in order to do so. But it is a fallacy to suppose that therefore all is well so long as we drop the hope of deduction.

**Quine's suggestion** here only begins to make sense within his more general approach. Since, in the absence of first philosophy, we have no alternative but to examine science from the inside, there is no danger that philosophy should adopt and impose a criterion from outside. The criteria to be raised are the criteria of science, and this involves no circularity or prejudicial assumption, but rather a simple recognition of what the enterprise of epistemology is.

Second, the only sceptical doubts that are possible are also those that derive from science rather than attempt to criticize science from some arbitrary 'rational' perspective.

Our question should not be '*what is it that enables our scientific beliefs to count as knowledge?*', for this question makes us suppose that our answer cannot itself appeal to any scientific results without circularity. Instead, we should ask '*If our science were true, how could we know it?*'.

Here the epistemological question is asked within the scope of the hypothetical, and since the question therefore assumes the truth of current scientific results, the answer can do so as well. Here epistemology is taking place within science.

So the dangers that Hegel points to only arise, for Quine, in systems which **separate philosophy from science**. Once, as holists, we give up that separation and draw in our horns, there can be no general methodological objection to the practice of epistemology.

The reason, then, why Quine supposes that the danger of circularity is removed when we abandon the search for certainty is that that search only made sense within the attempt at a first philosophy, of which it was traditionally a central part.

#### 15.4 EPISTEMOLOGY NATURALIZED

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What then becomes of philosophy once it is thought of as part of science rather than as the separate study of science? Are we able to ask (and hope to answer) the same questions as before, but within

the new perspective? And what attitude should we adopt to scepticism now? Is there still room for the sceptic?

Traditional epistemology studied the relation between data and belief, between evidence and theory. It attempted to show how our beliefs (for instance, the belief in an external world) are justified by the data from which they spring; how our scientific theories are justified by the evidence which supports them. Is this study to be abandoned and replaced, or can it be continued within the new perspective? Quine seems to vacillate between these two alternatives. Sometimes he suggests that the old questions smack of first philosophy, and that anyway the attempt to discover a relation between evidence and theory which would make the theory justified has proved to be unsuccessful. Why not then, he asks, simply study how we do go about moving from our data to the formation of belief? This factual study, squarely within the bounds of psychology, is what he calls naturalized epistemology. It leaves aside questions of justification and considers only the genetic, causal questions. We cease to worry about the gap between evidence and theory, and study instead the causal relations between the two.

Quine has a suggestion about one way in which that investigation could proceed. He finds in the practice of language learning a mirror or model of the practice of theory-building. Observation sentences are basic on each side; they are the evidence on which our theories rest and the point at which language confronts reality directly enough for single sentences to be individually learnable (see 7.2). So an empirical substitute for the study of the relation between evidence

and theory is the study of the ways in which language-learners actually move from an understanding of simple observation sentences to an understanding of the more complex sentences (expressing dispositions and tendencies or the consequences of unfulfilled conditions) of which theories are constructed.

Quine is suggesting here that naturalized epistemology does not involve a change of subject but rather offers a new way of studying the old subject. The old problem was the gap between 'meagre input' and 'torrential output'. But this gap can be studied in two ways, either by the study of the relation between observation sentences and theoretical sentences, as mentioned above, or more directly by the study of the relation between the physical input received by the human subject - retinal disturbance, for instance, constitutes the information received by the eye - and the beliefs which the subject is thereby caused to form; those beliefs being studied physicalistically, that is by studying the neurophysiology of the brain-activity which constitutes them. It is this latter approach, perhaps, which is the most characteristic of naturalized epistemology, and Quine holds (Quine, 1969, p. 83) that we are prompted to study it

for somewhat the same reasons that always prompted epistemology; namely, in order to see how evidence relates to theory, and in what ways one's theory of nature transcends any available evidence.

As far as sceptical arguments are concerned, we have already seen that Quine is willing to admit the general epistemological question 'If our science were true, how could we know it?'. Within this question, the sceptic is allowed to find a role. He will have to find reasons within science for questioning whether scientific truth can be known; our science will have to show itself unknowable. This is not impossible, according to Quine, but it is very unlikely. There are two standard sceptical moves which are ruled out in advance by his requirement that the sceptic work from within science.

The first is any version of the argument from error which starts from the claim that it is logically possible at any time and in any circumstances that one's present belief should be false. Quine wants to nip any argument of this sort in the bud, by refusing to allow the notion of logical possibility which it uses. The only sort of possibility he is willing to admit is physical possibility, that which our science admits as possible. To allow another sort of possibility, one impervious to the results of physics, would be to re-create the

analytic/synthetic distinction. And it is not physically possible at



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any time and in any circumstances that one's present belief should be false. If the only room for falsehood is logical room, it is no room at all. So this general sceptical argument does not get going. In a similar vein, the sceptic might try to argue that, for all we know, reality may be entirely different from the way we take it to be; the world need not recognize our theory, or our object as it exists for us need not correspond to that object as it exists in itself. All these remarks, in Quine's view, rely on the supposition that there is an object, the world, which is separate from our theory and which provides a criterion by which our theory may be determined as false (not by us, of course, but simply in fact). But with Quine's account of the relation between epistemology and science, this supposition is senseless. The only criterion of reality is the one which science provides; the only reality is the one which science describes. So again there is no danger that our criterion should fail to fit our object, for science provides both criterion and object: a situation which should hold some attractions for Hegel.

These two sceptical approaches are ruled out, then, but any sceptical argument that uses science to confute science is, methodologically at least, acceptable. And Quine himself provides us with one. For he takes it to be a deliverance of science that we receive a 'meagre input' from which there is somehow generated a 'torrential output'. And surely this contrast between the meagre and the torrential is all that is needed for the sceptic to mount an argument from within science against the possibility of any scientific or theoretical knowledge. For if the gap is as great as all that, how can there be sufficient in the input to make justified the output we provide in response to it?

I think the response Quine would make here is one he makes in a similar context elsewhere (Quine, 1981, p. 475), that the sceptic here is overreacting. Instead of leaping immediately to enormous sceptical conclusions, we should wait to see what the naturalistic study of the relation between input and output turns up. It may seem to us in advance that the input is disproportionately small to ground such a fluent output, but empirical psychology may yet find ways of redressing the balance. So the contrast between input and output is not yet a deliverance of science; it may be and it may not be.

There seems, however, to be a misconception here. Quine is supposing that the question whether there is a disproportionate gap between input and output is empirical, and it is to be resolved

by the naturalistic study of the causal relations between input,

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conceived of as sensory stimuli, and output, conceived of as the neurophysical states of the brain that are the physical correlates of beliefs. But viewed in these terms there is no contrast between meagre and torrential. The input is (together with other things) sufficient to cause the brain states which are its effects, and in following this causal story we are not any more studying a gap between input and output, if that gap is thought of as analogous to the gap between evidence and theory. The contrast between meagre input and torrential output, like the gap between evidence and theory, is not a causal matter but an inferential one. It belongs to what Sellars calls "the logical space of reasons" (cf. Sellars, 1963, ch. 5.1). The evidence is not conceived of as causally insufficient to ground the theory; it is insufficient (if at all) in the sense that it does not provide sufficient reason for, or fails to justify, the theory. So Quine is faced with a choice. Either he is ruling out this inferential question as not amenable to naturalistic epistemology, or he accepts it but fails to provide any method of answering it. (This point is well made by Stroud, 1984, ch. 6.)

But what would justify taking the first horn of this dilemma? Quine might wish to claim, or admit, that in studying the causal relation between input, which he sometimes tendentiously calls information, and output we have abandoned the epistemologist's traditional interest in evidential questions. Viewed naturalistically, the crucial gap has ceased to exist. But what in his position justifies this renunciation? The mere fact that epistemology for him has become naturalized, or is now a part of science rather than a superior court of reason, does not itself mean that questions of justification are ruled out of court. Science itself is not wholly naturalistic. It contains its own evaluative criteria, and those criteria can be used within science to tackle evaluative questions such as those of justification. It looks, then, as if naturalized epistemology contains no answer to the sceptic, nor even a method whereby an answer might be found.

The distinction we have been using here between evidential and causal questions might itself be questioned. Why should not causal enquiries be themselves enquiries into justification? After all, among possible accounts of justification considered earlier one prominent possibility was the causal theory of justification, which holds that

beliefs are justified iff they are caused in a certain way. Perhaps Quine would wish to use this avenue to show how an interest in causal matters can both make sense of and hope to answer questions of justification. But if this is his answer to the sceptic, it is merely

another form of externalism in the theory of justification. We have seen, so far, no reason to accept externalist answers; it is internalism that has the backing of intuition (9.2-3). But whether this is so or not, a Quinean adoption of externalism would be an independent stance, justified by neither of the distinctive theses considered here. Neither the absence of a first philosophy nor the naturalization of epistemology yields an independent argument for externalism. So if we still want an internalist answer to the questions of epistemology, Quine provides no answer and no substitute.

### 15.5 CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this chapter we distinguished between arguments that the enterprise of epistemology could never start, and arguments that it could never be successfully completed. (Some arguments were of both sorts.) We have seen that Hegel provides a conception of epistemology as the progression from one state of consciousness to other higher states, under which the arguments for the impossibility of epistemology are defused. Chisholm's notion of critical cognitivism failed to provide any answer at all, but Quine's rejection of first philosophy did yield a non-Hegelian perspective which escaped the charge of vicious circularity. The difference between Hegel and Quine, however, is that Hegel's perspective contains the promise of an answer to the sceptic, conceived now as someone arguing that the epistemological enterprise will never be successfully completed. Quine's views, however, seem not to offer any strategy to defeat the sceptical arguments that will arise naturally within the confines he accepts, i.e., sceptical arguments from within science. So we are still left with a sceptical argument which we have not seen how to escape from or rise above without taking the plunge with Hegel. This commits me to offering my own suggestion. An attractive idea about how to reply to the sceptic (made, for example, in Stroud, 1984, ch. 7) is that we must find some means of preventing him from generalizing from his chosen examples. We might, that is to say, admit that we don't know that we are not brains in a vat, but hope to avoid being driven by this to admit that we don't know much else either. This was the strategy which Nozick followed but in chapter 3 we found it to be unsuccessful. It leaves us asserting counter-intuitively that we can know what we will do tomorrow but cannot know that there will be a tomorrow. But there is another

sense in which the sceptic is generalizing from admitted instances,

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on which we might focus instead. This sense can be plainly seen in standard versions of the argument from illusion, and is also the central move in the argument from error.

The argument from error holds that if your present cognitive state is, as far as you can tell, relevantly indistinguishable from another which was not a state of knowledge, you cannot now claim to know. And it's not just that you can't claim to know; you don't know, because your present state is relevantly indistinguishable from (similar in all relevant respects to) one in which you don't know. This argument relies on an epistemological analogue of the principle of universalizability familiar in ethical theory (see I.2). In my view that principle is mistaken, and showing this seems to me to be important in the fight against the sceptic. (Everyone says piously that the aim should be to learn from the sceptic, but their practice only rarely fits their preaching.)

The principle of universalizability is mistaken in ethics because it ignores the ability further properties may have in a new case to defeat what were sufficient reasons for a moral judgement in a previous case, without causing us to return to the previous case and revise our judgement there (see Dancy, 1981). Because of this ability, we can never be driven from case to case by the universalizability of moral judgements. The fact that this case is indistinguishable from the first in all characteristics relevant to the moral value of the first does not ensure that the second has no other morally relevant characteristics; and so no choice we make in the second case can require us to alter our opinion of the first, unless we decide that the two cases are similar in all relevant respects (in all respects relevant to either). But someone who thinks they are morally different will not make that decision, and hence cannot be caught by universalizability. His position is consistent so long as he maintains that there is a morally relevant difference, even if he is not yet in a position to point to that difference.

The analogy with epistemology suggests that it is not possible to show that we don't know now by showing that we cannot point to a relevant difference between our present case and one in which we don't know. So long as we assert (as we will) that there is a relevant difference, our inability to point to it is no proof that we don't know, nor even that we are wrong (inconsistent) to claim to know.

This conclusion is not a form of externalism, however. For someone who knows now, despite being unable to point to a relevant difference between his present situation and one in which he doesn't



know, is or may still be in possession of the factors in virtue of which his cognitive state is one of knowledge. This is because the fact that there is a relevant difference (and the relevant difference which there is) is not one of the features in virtue of which he knows now. It allows him to know now when he didn't then, but the properties in virtue of which he knows now do not include this allower. If there were no allower, he would not know now; but this does not show that the facts in virtue of which he knows now include the allower. The properties in virtue of which he knows now are more ordinary properties about the present case, not arcane relations between this case and others. And these more ordinary properties .ue properties which he (probably) can point to. For instance, I know that today is wednesday even though I cannot say that I have not made or could not make mistakes in relevantly similar situations. I may not be able to distinguish my situation from those actual or possible ones, but I can say how I know that today is wednesday. And this is all that internalism in the theory of justification requires. There is considerable similarity between the argument I offer here and the externalist response (in the other sense of externalism, externalism in the philosophy of mind) to the argument from illusion (1.1.a); that argument also relies on a version of the universalizability principle. whatever its merits, I cannot claim that my argument is wholly secure. This means that the title I originally intended for this book is doubly apt. That title, 'Feet of Clay', was dropped because it was too allusive. But it expressed the sense in which coherentism maintains that we can have empirical knowledge without a solid base to stand on: without foundations. It also expresses the fact that scepticism may continue more durable, more seductive and more secure than any reply we have found so far.