



QUESTIONS  
IN CHRISTIAN  
PHILOSOPHY

# HOW DO WE KNOW?

SECOND EDITION

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AN  
INTRODUCTION TO  
EPISTEMOLOGY

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# 1

## WHAT IS EPISTEMOLOGY?

**How do we know what we know?** This is the basic question that undergirds the discipline of epistemology. We take it for granted that we know many different things, but we rarely ask this basic question about our knowledge. In fact, most people assume that intellectual questions like these are unimportant and have a great aversion to pursuing them. Yet, because we make errors in judgment that are often costly to us, this is the kind of question that we should take seriously. This is especially true regarding the big choices in life.

This book recognizes the importance of asking these kinds of questions and offers an introductory treatment of the basic questions and issues in epistemology. It is designed for those who have no background in philosophy and lack familiarity with these issues. In this chapter, we deal with preliminary issues and make a case for the importance of epistemology. In the remainder of the book, we offer a brief sketch of the major epistemological issues.

### WHAT IS EPISTEMOLOGY, AND WHY DO WE NEED IT?

Philosophy is a discipline that addresses a range of important intellectual questions. For example, some philosophers pursue a branch of philosophy called *metaphysics* that examines ultimate reality by considering things like the nature of time, freedom, essences, God, and the soul, to name just a few. Ethics is a discipline of philosophy that examines morality and human actions. Here, philosophers debate people's actions and moral systems. In contrast to these areas of philosophy, epistemology is a branch of philosophy that deals with the nature and sources of knowledge and develops a theory of knowledge. As such, epistemology is referred to as the study of knowledge. Within this field, philosophers might ask the following kinds of questions:



- What does it mean to say that we know something?
- How do we come to know various things?
- What is truth, and how do we find it?
- What does it mean to have epistemic justification, and is this necessary?
- What are epistemological virtues, and are they helpful for us?
- How reliable are our perceptions?
- Can we have certainty?

These, along with other important questions, represent the kind of things we will look at in this book. We will say a bit more about these questions shortly.

Before we do that, however, we should consider why epistemology is important and why we should give it any attention. For some people, it seems foolish or even arrogant to ask epistemological questions. There is a sense in which this is understandable. After all, most people go through life gaining knowledge about all kinds of things without exploring these kinds of questions. Perhaps, they say, asking epistemic questions is a waste of time and mental energy. And, they might say, philosophers who raise such questions solve no puzzles and only create more intellectual problems.

To these concerns, we offer two kinds of response. First, it is unnatural and unfruitful to avoid epistemological questions. That is, we by our nature as human beings long for knowledge and depend on it for all aspects of life, such that not asking these kinds of questions cuts off natural and needed intellectual growth. Consider, for example, the way a child seeks after knowledge. Children have an unquenchable thirst for understanding about their world. I (Dew) happen to have, by God's good favor, four beautiful children. Watching them grow up is fascinating. They learn to eat, crawl, walk, ride bikes, play piano and baseball, enjoy puzzles, and so much more. But most fun of all, they learn how to think. And when this begins to happen, our conversations explode with questions. As a father, I am daily bombarded with questions about trivial things like the following:

“Daddy, what is a tree?”

“Daddy, why is the sky blue?”

“Daddy, why do we wear shoes?”

“Daddy, do I need to wear clothes today?”

“Daddy, where are you going?”

“Daddy, how do I turn on the Wii?”

“Daddy, why can’t we play outside in the nighttime?”

But trivial questions are not the only kind of questions that my children ask. They also ask about the big things in life. Just when I am not expecting something heavy from them, they might also ask:

“Daddy, what happened to Grandpa when he died?”

“Daddy, why do we have to die?”

“Daddy, will my friend who is sick ever get better?”

“Daddy, where does God live?”

“Daddy, when will Jesus come back?”

When children ask such questions, they are trying to understand their world. They come into this world knowing and understanding very little and spend the rest of their lives trying to figure out everything. Seeking knowledge and trying to understand how we get this knowledge is a natural thing for us to do. In fact, sometimes it is hard not to ask epistemological questions.

Consider the way the world changed by asking epistemological questions. In the seventeenth century, Francis Bacon introduced a new method of gaining knowledge—the inductive method. It is safe to say that advances were already taking place before him, but with Bacon, modern science was thrust forward with a new method capable of discovery and invention. Within a short time, modern science was surging forward, and the world would be forever changed. Today, we reap the benefits of the scientific revolution, which was built on a major epistemological shift. If intellectuals had not been asking these questions then, you would be walking to work instead of driving your car, you would die of rudimentary illnesses, and you would write letters instead of text messages. In short, epistemological inquiry changed the world—literally!

We are also reminded of how natural and fruitful it is to seek after knowledge when we consider our lives and careers. Many of us work in jobs that require specific kinds of knowledge or a particular set of skills. If we lacked these, we would not be able to do what we do. Thus, people go to college and trade schools to learn what they need to know. Failure to pursue these kinds of knowledge would greatly limit our ability to work and provide for our families. And in each of these branches of vocation, epistemic assumptions and methods are at play.

As a second way of responding to those who think it is arrogant and unhelpful to pursue epistemological issues is to not know how high the

stakes are for the questions at hand. We would be fools not to seek the best possible answers and information that may be available to the big questions of life. For example, consider once again the questions that my children often ask me. “Daddy, what happens when we die?” As a Christian, I answer that question in a particular way. I explain to my children how God made us and what happens at death. This response, however, assumes that God does exist and that Christianity is ultimately true. But this raises the question as to how we know that these beliefs are true. When someone loses a loved one, that person, whether a Christian or a non-Christian, naturally wonders whether or not God really exists. And given humanity’s general desire to live and avoid death, it is foolish not to seek answers to these philosophical questions. If God does not exist, then one is free to live any way one sees fit. But if God does exist, then how one lives would surely matter a great deal. Thus, the reality of death forces us to think about the existence of God, which in turn forces us to think about how we might know if God exists or not.

Or, consider the way that the legal system works. In the United States, for example, people are often sentenced to death after being convicted of murder. How do we know they committed murder? It might be the case that eyewitnesses saw this particular murder take place and gave a report to the police. Or, it might be the case that there was sufficient circumstantial evidence to warrant a murder conviction. In either case, decisions about life and death are being made on the strength of a particular kind of information. But is it possible that eyewitness testimony is not completely accurate? Perhaps the witnesses thought they saw something that they did not see. And even though there may be sufficient circumstantial evidence to convict someone of murder, it might still be possible that all of this evidence is coincidental and thus the convicted party is innocent. We raise these points not because we are trying to raise questions about the death penalty. Rather, we raise these points to illustrate the way life-and-death decisions are based on epistemological assumptions. We often assume that eyewitnesses see everything as it actually is or that circumstantial evidence is conclusive. But these assumptions are possibly false. Failure to engage in epistemological considerations could have dire consequences. Therefore, we suggest that epistemology is an important pursuit for all people, not just for intellectuals and philosophers.

## WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

There are a large number of excellent books on epistemology. Students who want to pursue epistemology further will have plenty of resources at their disposal to satisfy their curiosity. Yet, over the years we have noticed that those who are new to philosophy have an especially difficult time with epistemology. Philosophy itself is hard enough, but for most students, epistemology is often the hardest of all.

This book is written for those with no background in philosophy. It is easy to find good resources that deal with the information in a more technical or academic fashion or that give greater attention to a particular issue than we have here. Many of these books, however, are too technical for beginning philosophy students. Moreover, books that are accessible for beginning students are often focused on specific topics within epistemology and are not intended to offer a broad introduction. We attempt to survey the major issues in epistemology in a concise and accessible fashion, giving students the basics of what they need to know to go further in philosophy or for pursuing their own unique discipline. In short, this is an epistemology for beginners, not for advanced philosophers.

There is one other important feature of this book—it brings a Christian perspective to bear on the questions of knowledge. This does not mean that our only goal is to tell readers about Christianity. Rather, it identifies our perspective. On many general epistemological issues, our treatment of an issue will be similar to other, non-Christian perspectives. But in places where Christianity has a unique account of an issue, we will try to show how certain epistemological issues intersect with a Christian perspective and what Christianity has to say about these issues. A case in point is chapter ten, where we deal with the issue of divine revelation. On this note, let us say something about the kinds of issues we cover in this book.

## WHAT ISSUES WILL WE COVER?

After the general introduction offered here in chapter one, chapter two examines the question of knowledge. Specifically, it answers the question, What is knowledge? For most students, this is an odd question, but it is significant nonetheless. Chapter two traces the history of the answer to this question. This historical treatment goes back to Plato and shows that most philosophers have understood knowledge to be justified true belief. To know something, one

must first believe it and have justification for it, and it must in fact be true. Although this definition of knowledge has endured for more than two thousand years, it received a significant challenge in the twentieth century from Edmund Gettier. Chapter two outlines what the Gettier problem is and how various philosophers have responded to it.

Chapter three focuses on the sources of our knowledge. Specifically, it answers the following question: Where does knowledge come from? To answer this question, the chapter looks at various sources. First, it considers the place of reason in our knowledge. Here we consider the works of Plato and Descartes, who were suspicious of our senses and confident in our ability to use reason. It then looks at other philosophers like Lucretius, Bacon, Locke, and Hume, who took a different perspective from that of Plato and Descartes. These empiricists thought that experience played a central role in giving us knowledge. In fact, many of these philosophers thought that knowledge could come only from the senses, experience, and observations. This chapter also examines the value of testimony from other people and how this informs our beliefs and provides knowledge. Then, it notes the possibility that we have divine revelation from God and how this might give us knowledge of non-physical things. Here we do not make a case for revelation, because we do that in chapter ten. Instead, we note the two possible kinds of revelation that we might have—natural and special. Finally, chapter three considers faith as a source of revelation, arguing that despite what is often argued by some believers, faith is not a source of information.

Chapter four explores the question of truth, answering the questions, What is truth, and how do we find it? Against relativism, it first argues that there are in fact some things that are true of reality. But once this is done, it considers the nature of truth itself. What is it about a particular proposition that allows us to deem it as a true statement? In light of this question, chapter four considers various definitions of truth: the correspondence theory of truth, coherentism, and pragmatism. According to the correspondence theory, a true proposition will be one that corresponds to the way things really are in the world. If the statement does not correspond, it is not true. As we point out there, this approach has been the dominant view for well over two thousand years. More recently, some philosophers have rejected this view in favor of either coherentism or pragmatism. Coherentists argue that a true statement is one that is consistent with, or coheres with, everything else we believe or think we know.



Pragmatism, by contrast, says that true statements are those that work—or are valuable—for a particular individual or group of people. Chapter four examines each of these positions, arguing that both coherentism and pragmatism offer some helpful insights in identifying truth claims. After all, if a statement is really true, it will be consistent with other things we know and will work for us. Yet, these two criteria by themselves are insufficient as definitions for truth, because a proposition can be consistent with other beliefs and beneficial in some way but still be false. In this chapter we explain how these are necessary conditions for truth but not sufficient conditions for truth. In the end, we argue that a correspondence theory of truth must be affirmed.

In chapter five we consider inferences and how they function in our thinking. We first examine the nature of inferences to show how they work and how often we employ them in our thinking, even if we are not consciously aware of doing so. Specifically, we explore the relationship between knowledge claims and the evidence that supports those claims to show how inferences make the interpretive move from evidence to claim. Once this is done, we then describe the different kinds of inferences that we make. Deductive inferences, for example, move from a set of premises to the conclusion. If the premises of a deductive argument are true and the structure of the argument is valid, then the conclusions of these arguments are absolutely certain. Inductive inferences move from a very broad evidential base to make general interpretive claims about that evidence. Unlike deductive inference, induction allows for a vast expansion of knowledge but does not yield absolute certainty. Finally, abductive inference takes one or two pieces of evidence and seeks the best possible explanation of this evidence. This chapter concludes by noting the various errors that we can make in drawing inferences.

Chapter six explores the issue of perception. Specifically, it tries to answer the question, What do we perceive? This might seem like an odd question, but it is important. When we see the dog Buddy in front of us, do we see Buddy himself or just some visual representation of him? And, if it is just a visual representation of Buddy, how do we know that our perception of him reflects the way he really is? In light of these kinds of questions, we consider various models of perception. Direct realism, for example, suggests that we see the objects themselves (Buddy) directly and thus we see things the way they really are. But various philosophers have rejected this due to particular problems that it faces. Others have argued for an indirect realism (or representationalism),

which says we do not see the objects themselves (Buddy), but rather we see some mental representation of the objects. Indirect realists argue, however, that these representations genuinely reflect the objects themselves. But this view also has some problems. Finally, some have argued for a phenomenological view of perception, which says that we have only mental representations and that these may or may not reflect reality itself. After considering each perspective, we, along with a growing number of philosophers, argue for a return to some form of direct realism. Yet, it is a chastened form of direct realism which recognizes the very real possibility of misperception.

In chapter seven, we address the issue of epistemic justification. In particular, we deal with the question: Do we need justification? We first describe what it means to have epistemic justification and then survey the debate between internalists and externalists about whether or not we need justification. Justification, we note, has to do with being rational about our beliefs. An internalist believes that, in order to be rational, one must have evidence for one's beliefs. In other words, if a person believes that God exists, then she must have reasons for thinking this way if she is to be rational. This is called internalism because it says that a person must have epistemic access to the reasons—she must possess them internally. Externalists disagree, suggesting that for a person to be rational it may not be necessary for him to have reasons and evidence that support his beliefs. After all, they contend, all of us believe various kinds of things without examining the evidential basis for them. After considering this debate between internalists and externalists, we conclude that both have some positives.

Chapter eight is a new chapter to this second edition. It considers the questions about objectivity and subjectivity. We first take up the distinction itself, explaining that objectivity refers to the assumption that we apprehend reality free from bias, experience, and other such subjective factors that would render our view idiosyncratic. By contrast, the assumption that we are entirely subjective refers to an approach that says all of our perspectives on issues are determined by personal factors. We then offer a very brief historical backdrop of the major thinkers in the modern era that advocated for the ideal of objectivity, giving special attention to their methodologies. This is followed by the same in the postmodern era. The chapter concludes by offering an assessment of the debate on these issues.

Chapter nine surveys an important issue in epistemology—intellectual virtue and virtue epistemology. We describe what a virtue is, noting that it is

some quality or characteristic that produces well-being. By contrast, vices are those qualities or characteristics that are detrimental to the person. While virtue is normally considered to be a moral issue, epistemologists also have a long practice of incorporating virtues into their epistemology. In this chapter, we explain how certain intellectual qualities like studiousness, humility, honesty, courage, and carefulness aid and assist us in properly apprehending the world in which we live. In other words, these intellectual qualities help us to see clearly and avoid epistemological error.

In chapter ten, we address an issue that is unique to our introduction to epistemology—divine revelation. Specifically, we consider whether or not there is such a thing as divine revelation. We argue that we are within our epistemic rights for believing that God has revealed himself to us. In fact, we argue that this revelation comes in two basic forms—general and special. As Christian theologians have long argued, natural revelation is the revelation that God has given us of himself, which is found in the created order. We consider the various kinds of theological, scientific, and philosophical objections to natural revelation that have been given but argue that these arguments are not convincing. We conclude that this revelation is limited in what it can tell us about God and nonphysical things, but it is there nonetheless. Special revelation is the revelation that God has given us about himself that comes to us through Jesus Christ and the Bible. In this chapter, we are especially interested in our rationale for believing that Jesus and the Bible give us information about God. In short, our approach is christocentric. We argue that because of the resurrection of Jesus, we have good reason to think that he was who he claimed to be. If that is the case, then he gives us information about God, and so does the Bible.

Chapter eleven concludes the book by exploring the problem of skepticism and the possibility of having certainty. Skepticism offers a grim outlook about the possibilities of knowledge. We first survey the different kinds of skepticism, such as methodological skepticism, metaphysical skepticism and Pyrrhonian skepticism. After this, we look at the leading skeptical thinkers throughout history to see why they said what they did. Here we look at Pyrrho of Elis, Sextus Empiricus, René Descartes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. After considering the different reasons that skeptics have given, we argue that they offer good reminders that epistemic error is always possible, but they do not justify their ultimate conclusions. There are good reasons for thinking that we

can have knowledge. Here we consider these reasons but point out that this still does not yield certainty for the vast majority of our beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

Each of these issues will be dealt with in more detail in the following chapters. Students may choose to read this book straight through from beginning to end or may decide to read one particular chapter at a time depending on their interest or need. The book is designed so that either one of these approaches will work.

### *Discussion Questions*

1. What kinds of issues does epistemology deal with?
2. Despite the suspicions of some, why is epistemology such an important discipline?

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