

Stewart Cohen

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Much theorizing in philosophy concerns issues characterized as "epistemic". As an example, a central issue in epistemology concerns what it is for a belief to be epistemically justified. But what exactly do these theorists mean by 'epistemic'? This question is worth asking because 'epistemic' is a technical term. If you ask a competent, even sophisticated, English speaker who is not a philosopher whether a belief is epistemically justified, he will have no idea what he is being asked. This contrasts with non-technical expressions like 'moral'. When a philosopher tells us she is working on moral justification, as competent English speakers, we know what she is talking about.

What are theories of epistemic justification about? Here our competence as English speakers is of no help. Because 'epistemic' is a technical term, in order to understand what theories of "epistemic justification" are about, we need to know how 'epistemic' is being used. I maintain there is considerable confusion regarding central issues in epistemology owing to the fact that the term 'epistemic' functions as an undefined, or inadequately defined technical term. I do not deny that in certain contexts, it is fairly clear what a particular epistemologist means by 'epistemic'. My claim is rather that its use in certain theoretical disputes is not clear enough to make sense of these disputes.

Epistemically Justified Belief

Let's first consider the debates about the correct theory of justified belief. Since epistemologists largely gave up on trying to solve the Gettier problem, this has been perhaps the most widely discussed issue in epistemology. There are various competing theories--evidentialism, reliabilism, proper function, virtue theories, etc.

What are these theories about? Typically, in setting up the discussion, justification theorists will concede that beliefs can be justified in various ways. While beliefs can be prudentially justified and morally justified, justification theorists claim they are not talking about these kinds of justification. Rather, they are talking about *epistemic* justification. Unlike 'prudential' and 'moral', 'epistemic' is, as I noted, a technical term. So in order to understand what justification theorists are talking about, we need to know what 'epistemic' means in this context. Moreover, if we are going to make sense of the debate between competing theories of justified belief, there is an important constraint on any such definition of 'epistemic', viz., the definition must be theory neutral. Any definition that is not theory-neutral will end up stipulating that one of the theories is correct, and that certain theories are incorrect. If we define 'epistemic' in a way that favors certain views by stipulation, then we have not made sense of the dispute.

It is important to understand the nature of the requirement for a theory-neutral definition. Alston argues that if there is no theory-neutral specification of what 'justification' is ("in an epistemic context"), we should conclude there is no unique property of epistemic justification, and abandon attempts to decide which of the proposed theories of justification is correct.¹ But why does he see the need for a theory-neutral specification of 'justified'? Surely we cannot require that for every theoretical dispute concerning the nature of T, that there be a theory neutral way to describe T, independent of 'T' itself. Such a requirement would rule out theoretical disputes about knowledge, causation, morality, etc. In each of these cases, the only theoretically neutral characterization is that the dispute concerns knowledge, causation, morality, etc. So why can't the justification theorist simply say that

¹ *Beyond Justification*

the dispute is about epistemic justification? This is the hole in Alston's argument. The crucial point Alston misses is that unlike 'knowledge', 'causation' or 'morality', 'epistemic justification' is a technical expression. So if all we can say is that the dispute is about epistemic justification, we have not yet made sense of the dispute. We cannot argue about the nature of a property characterized only in undefined technical vocabulary.

So what do justification theorists actually say about what they mean by 'epistemic'? They say various things. Perhaps the most common is:

(1) Epistemic justification (unlike moral or prudential justification) is related to truth.

Of course, 'related to truth' is too imprecise for our purposes. How might we make it more precise. One way would be to say that

a) Necessarily, if P is epistemically justified, then P is true.

But such a definition would stipulate that fallibilism, a doctrine subscribed to by almost every participant in the debate, is false.

We can weaken the relation thus:

b) Necessarily, if P is epistemically justified, then P is probably true.

For this definition to do any work, we need to know what notion of probability is being invoked. When Goldman says this, he seems to be referring to some kind of frequency or statistical notion according to which necessarily, most epistemically justified beliefs are true.² Of course this isn't really a definition of 'epistemic justification' so much as an adequacy constraint on a theory of epistemic justification, viz., any theory must have the result that most justified beliefs are true. Still, the constraint would distinguish epistemic justification from moral and prudential justification.

This approach suffers from a problem analogous to the reference class problem for frequency conceptions of probability. What exactly is the domain of 'most'? But more importantly for our purposes, the proposed constraint is not theory neutral. Evidentialists, and in particular mentalist evidentialists, hold that, the justification of a belief supervenes on the mental states of the subject. It is consistent with such a view that subjects with justified beliefs are radically deceived. To stipulate that necessarily most justified beliefs are true would disqualify mentalist evidentialism at the outset.

Can we appeal to a notion of evidential probability? On pain of circularity, 'evidential probability' cannot mean "degree of justification on the evidence". Moreover, non-evidentialists will reject characterizing epistemically justified beliefs as beliefs that are probable on the evidence. Remember that at this point we are not talking about theories of epistemic justification. Rather we are trying to determine what it is that theories of epistemic justification are about. To say that they are about a notion intimately connected with evidential probability would rule out non-evidentialist theories such as reliabilism.

(C) Another common approach relates justification to truth in a teleological way: An epistemically justified belief is justified relative to the goal of attaining truths, or perhaps attaining truths and avoiding falsehood. Even if we let pass worries about what it means to say that all agents who have justified beliefs have such goals, appealing to cognitive goals make it impossible to distinguish epistemic justification from prudential justification. Suppose God tell me that if I believe whatever the

² Goldman

ouija board tells me, he will see to it that I acquire lots of true beliefs (and no false beliefs). While I might thereby be practically justified in believing what the ouija board says (provided I desire to have more true beliefs), none of the participants to the dispute would count such a belief as epistemically justified.³

(2) Perhaps we can define epistemic justification by appealing to knowledge rather than truth, viz., epistemic justification is the kind of justification that is necessary for knowledge.⁴ The problem with this approach is that it is a substantive question whether a belief must be justified in order to be knowledge. Some philosophers deny that it is.⁵ Even those philosophers who do think justification is necessary for knowledge, do not take this to be true as a matter of stipulation. Just as they think it is a substantive (non-stipulative) fact about knowledge that it requires truth, so they think it's a substantive fact about knowledge that it requires justification. Knowledge is not a technical notion and so one cannot stipulate anything about its nature.

There is a further problem in defining 'epistemic justification' as the kind of justification required for knowledge. Justification concerns normative requirements--to be justified in ϕ -ing is to satisfy the relevant normative requirement for ϕ -ing. The view we are considering says that epistemic justification is the kind of justification required for knowing. This means that there is some normative requirement a belief must satisfy in order to be knowledge. Most justification theorists think that a belief must satisfy some evidential or reliability condition in order to be knowledge. Typically, these requirements will be classified as the justification condition. But a belief must satisfy more than one requirement in order to be an instance of knowledge. According to orthodoxy, there must be some sort of Gettier condition as well. Here again we see both evidentialist conditions as in defeasibility theories, or reliabilist conditions like safety. Finally there is a truth requirement for knowledge--only true beliefs are knowledge. Are all of these normative requirements? There is no consistent use of 'normative' that will settle this issue. But it is not obvious to me why, e.g. being supported by evidence or produced by a reliable cognitive process are normative requirements, but e.g., satisfying some defeasibility condition or being safe are not. So I see no basis for thinking that there is such thing as *the* normative requirement a belief must satisfy in order to be knowledge. And since being justified in ϕ -ing just is satisfying the normative requirement for ϕ -ing, there is no such thing as *the* kind of justification necessary for knowledge.⁶

Finally, I think many Bayesians would say they are talking about epistemic justification, but they think it attaches to credences rather than beliefs. And it's unclear it makes sense to say that a credence is knowledge.⁷

A modest proposal

Perhaps we could avoid the use of the technical term 'epistemic' altogether. Why not say simply that justification are concerned with rational belief? This raises the issue of whether beliefs can be practically rational. One could argue that one can be practically rational only in bring it about that one has a certain belief, but not in the believing itself.⁸ But if you think beliefs can be practically

³ For objections to various ways of spelling out the teleological conception see Fumerton.

⁴ Merriam Webster defines 'epistemic' as "of our relating to knowledge or knowing"

⁵ Armstrong, Dretske, Lewis, Hawthorne, Williamson, Kornblith.

⁶ We could of course conjoin the individual requirements, but this would not help the justification theorist.

⁷ Cf. Sarah Moss

⁸ Wrong kind of Reason

rational, then we can say the dispute is about the kind of rationality that applies exclusively to beliefs.⁹ On this way of construing 'epistemic', it makes no sense to say that an action is epistemically justified.

Unfortunately, there is a problem with this definition. Many epistemologists distinguish between justified belief and rational belief.¹⁰ It's clear why non-evidentialists want to make this distinction. It's hard to see how one could divorce the rationality of belief from considerations of evidence. Thus, some non-evidentialists attempt to avoid the so-called "new evil demon" counterexample by arguing that while subjects in the matrix may have rational beliefs, they fail to have justified beliefs.¹¹

Unfortunately, the distinction between rational beliefs and justified beliefs does not make any sense. Justification is domain relative. In addition to moral and prudential justification, there is rational justification. A belief is rational just in case it is rationally justified. So when one distinguishes between 'rational belief' and 'justified belief', one can only mean that one distinguishes between rationally justified belief, and some other kind of justified belief. What is the other kind of justification? Epistemologists who make this distinction say they are talking about epistemic justification. Distinguishing in this way between rational justification and epistemic justification yields the curious result that rational justification for beliefs is not epistemic. It also yields the result that there is no such thing as *the* kind of justification exclusive to beliefs. Beliefs can be both rationally justified and epistemically justified. So we are back to the problem of saying what epistemic justification is.

And it gets worse. Insofar as epistemologists want to distinguish between epistemic justification and rational justification, it appears that the parties to some long-standing disputes are simply talking past each other. Consider the dispute between evidentialism and reliabilism. Feldman and Conee have explicitly stated that when they talk about justified beliefs, they mean rational beliefs. But Goldman has explicitly denied that he's talking about rational belief. As near as I can tell, Feldman and Conee are in a much better position. At least we know what they are talking about, viz., rationality. I do not mean to say that the meaning of 'rational' is entirely clear. It is vague and ambiguous in ways that most interesting natural language vocabulary is. Consider some other natural language vocabulary describing other objects of our theorizing--'justice', 'causation', 'moral responsibility', 'knowledge', 'identity'... Despite the challenges presented by the unclarity of these terms, as competent speakers of English, we are in a position to theorize about their referents. Similarly, we are in a position to theorize about the nature of rationality. But are we in a position to theorize about epistemic justification? Here the situation is quite different. We do not confront merely problems of unclarity. Rather, because 'epistemic' is a technical expression, our linguistic competence is of no help whatsoever in determine the object of inquiry. We do not know what justification theorists, who deny they talking about rationality, are talking about. They tell us they are talking about epistemic justification. But you cannot explain what you are talking about by using an undefined technical term.¹²

⁹ Rosen –epistemically justified attitudes

¹⁰ Foley, Goldman, Bach, Bernecker, Weatherson, Bergman, Huemer, Sutton, Littlejohn, Lyons

¹¹ Goldman, Weatherson, Lyons, Bach. Goldman initially characterized his view as a naturalistic reduction of epistemic justification. But instead it could be viewed as a naturalistic reduction of the evidence (or reason) relation. [Comesana, Horgan, Goldman], viz., e is evidence/a reason for P just in case e is reliably connected to P (in the right way). While such a project certainly makes sense, viewing reliabilism in this way does not make sense of the dispute about epistemic justification. On this way of construing the issue, Reliabilism and evidentialism are no longer competing views. Indeed, Reliabilism and evidentialism could both be true. So again, we have not made sense of the dispute over epistemic justification.

¹² My earlier paper—"Is There a Problem about Justified Belief?" mistakenly argued the problem was with 'justified belief', rather than 'epistemic'..

Defining Technical Terms

Paradigm cases

I have been arguing that justification theorists cannot specify what they mean by 'epistemic' in a way that makes sense of the dispute about the nature of epistemic justification. But there are other ways of introducing technical terms besides simply stating their meaning. Will any of these serve the needs of the justification theorist?

Perhaps one can define a technical term by paradigm examples. In the debate about justification, there are standard cases or perception, memory, and inference that everyone agrees are cases of justified belief. Can we define 'epistemically justified' as the property had by the beliefs in these cases? Of course the beliefs in these cases have many properties. We can narrow the field considerably by stipulating that being epistemically justified is the *normative* property had by the beliefs in the paradigm examples. And justification theorists have taken pains to distinguish the normative property they are interested in from other normative properties beliefs might have, e.g. moral justification and practical justification.

The problem with this way of proceeding is that the beliefs in the paradigm example all have the property of being rationally justified. And as I noted, many justification theorist deny that this is what they are talking about. But then the mystery returns concerning what they are talking about. Suppose someone introduces the technical term ' ϕ ' by saying it the property that the following objects all have--tables, chairs, desks, couches, dressers, etc. But suppose further that the person stipulates that ' ϕ ' does not mean 'furniture'. I submit that we would be at a loss to know what ' ϕ ' means. We certainly would be unable to have a serious dispute about what the property of being ϕ

is. Similarly, when some justification theorists tell us that by 'epistemically justified', they do not mean 'rationally justified', we are at a loss to know what they mean. And similarly, we are unable to have a serious dispute about what epistemic justification is.

Theoretical Role

Some technical terms are defined, not by stipulation, but by the functional or causal role they play in a particular theory.¹³ Can the justification theorist define 'epistemic' by pointing to the role the notion of epistemic justification plays in epistemological theories?

I do not see how. Epistemic justification does not have any substantive theoretical role. The assumption is that it is some important normative property and the dispute is about which property that is. According to some philosophers, epistemic justification has a role in the theory of knowledge. But what exactly is that role? We cannot we say that epistemic justification is that property that turns a true belief into knowledge. The near unanimous acceptance of the Gettier counterexamples rules out that option. Can we say that epistemic justification is the property that plays the role of turning ungettiered true belief into knowledge? The problem with this proposal is that 'ungettiered' is itself a technical term. A belief is "gettiered" just in case it is epistemically justified and true but fails to be knowledge. Absent a solution to the gettier problem, this is the only clear meaning it can have. This makes this proposal for defining 'epistemic justification' circular.

Use by Epistemologists

¹³ Lewis

Perhaps technical expressions can have more in common with natural language expressions than I am allowing. How do natural language expressions get their meaning? Certainly, a large part of the story is that they acquire their meaning by being used by a community of speakers in a particular way. Can we say that a technical term like 'epistemic' is simply a term that acquires its meaning by being used in a particular way by a very specialized community--the community of epistemologists? If so, then when epistemologists talk about epistemic justification, what they are talking about is determined by how they have been using that expression.¹⁴

There is, however, an important disanalogy between the use of 'epistemic' by epistemologists and the use of natural language expressions by competent speakers of that language. Competent speakers are not guided in their use of a natural language expression T by an explicit theory of what it is to be a T. But epistemologists do have explicit theories about what it is to be an epistemically justified belief. And no doubt those theories play a role in how they are disposed to use 'epistemic'.¹⁵

Moreover, if the proposed analogy with natural language is correct, then just as one should not give a talk in English to a group of non-English speakers, so epistemologists should not be giving talks about epistemic justification to non-epistemologists. Since their audience is not part of the linguistic community whose patterns of use give 'epistemic' its meaning, the audience will not know what they are talking about. Similarly, it would not be possible for interdisciplinary-minded epistemologists to enlist the aid of non-philosophers for understanding the nature of epistemic justification. A cognitive psychologist would be unable to understand what the target notion is. It is important to understand that on the proposal we are considering, it is not just that there is no natural language expression for the property referred to by 'epistemic justification'. Rather there is no way at all to use the resources of natural language to characterize the property. If there were, epistemologists could tell us what it is without using "epistemic". But this proposal is premised on the supposition that this cannot be done.

Perhaps the most serious problem for this approach is that it allows that there is a fundamentally important normative property that cannot be expressed in natural language. It would be very surprising for such a notion to be, in this way, ineffable. This would be akin to the word 'moral' not existing and there being no way to describe what morality is. Again, it is important to see that the point is not simply that there is not a single natural language expression that picks out the relevant property. According to the proposal we are considering, there is no way to use the resources of natural language to characterize it. If there were such an ineffable normative notion, it is not clear why we should care about it. One would think that if it were an important notion, we would have developed a way to talk about it.

Epistemic Evaluation of Action

Many philosophers claim that actions or dispositions to act can be epistemically justified or rational and that we can be epistemically obligated to do certain things.¹⁶ For example, some philosophers think that in certain situations, we are epistemically obligated to gather evidence.¹⁷

What does it mean to say you have an epistemic obligation to do something? Of course we could stipulate whatever meaning we like for 'epistemic'. But can we define it in a way that is continuous with its meaning when applied to beliefs (as is implicitly assumed)? None of the ways we have considered for defining 'epistemic' as it applies to belief would make sense of epistemically

¹⁴ Thanks to Jessica Brown for raising this objection.

¹⁵ Thanks to Herman Cappelen for this observation.

¹⁶ Goldman, Field, MacFarlane, Kornblith, Hawthorne and Stanley, Schiffer, Weatherson, Bonjour, Boghossian, Buchak, Pollock.

¹⁷ Field, MacFarlane, Kornblith, Kvanvig, Buchak

evaluating actions. It doesn't make sense to say actions are probably true, or that acting in a certain way is a necessary condition of knowledge. Nor can actions be rational in the distinctive way that beliefs can be rational.

Perhaps we could appeal to the truth goal: One is epistemically obligated to do act ϕ just in case ϕ -ing would contribute to the goal of attaining truths and avoiding error. But it is ludicrous to suppose there is such an obligation. Memorizing the phone numbers of all the people listed in the phone book would allow me to attain many truths, but I am in no sense obligated to do so. [Harman] It might be practically rational if someone were paying me to do it, but I have no idea what it would mean to say it is epistemically rational.

The problem is especially acute when philosophers use 'epistemic' univocally in connection with both action and belief. Both Hartry Field and John MacFarlane hold that there are epistemic norms governing how and to what extent we gather evidence. According to Field, there are epistemic norms "both for believing and for acting so as to improve one's epistemic situation (e.g. by trying to gather more evidence...)" MacFarlane argues that the preface paradox illustrates how one could have an obligation to gather more evidence. He says that in a "preface situation", it looks as if you have no rational options. Either you hold a set of beliefs you know to be inconsistent or you ignore the evidence of your own fallibility. So what does rationality require of you in a preface situation? Here is MacFarlane:

"You must see to it that either you do not disbelieve the conjunction of your claims... or you do not believe any (or most) of these claims. How would you go about it? You would step up critical examination of these claims. You would do more studies, try harder to embed them in established theory, publish them so that others can scrutinize them, and do all of the things a good scientist does. That is, you would change your beliefs indirectly, by seeking new evidence, not by force of will. This is precisely what you *ought* to do. When one finds oneself with preface-like beliefs and disbeliefs, one ought to see to it that they change."

What kind of ought is this? Clearly one is under no moral obligation to do things to avoid having inconsistent beliefs (except perhaps in a very contrived situation). Is it a prudential ought? In some cases, it might be. But of course, one may be offered a lot of money not to do anything about one's inconsistent beliefs. So the only thing MacFarlane could have in mind is that the ought is epistemic. Does it make sense to say, as Field does, that one can be epistemically obligated to improve one's epistemic situation by gathering more evidence? One can be morally obligated or prudentially rational to gather evidence. If your child is critically ill, it is immoral to allow the illness to be treated in a certain way, without looking into the alternatives. If you want to buy a safe car, it would be imprudent not to look into which models are the safest. But what does it mean to say that one is epistemically obligated or epistemically rational to gather evidence? If one believes P with insufficient evidence, one does have epistemic obligations. But they pertain to one's beliefs. One is rationally required to stop believing P.

Could we say that one is epistemically required to either give up P, or to find more evidence in support of P? Note that even if one decides to gather more evidence for P, one is still obligated to give up P pending the results of one's investigation. Is one in any sense required to gather more evidence? If one wants to know whether P is true, it could be rational for one to gather more evidence pertaining to P. But again, this would be prudential rationality, arising from one's desire to know whether P.¹⁸

Knowledge norms

¹⁸ Feldman, evidence of evidence cases, norms of inquiry.

Timothy Williamson has argued that assertions are governed by the norm: Assert P only if you know P.¹⁹ Williamson says that this norm of assertion is constitutive. That is to say, it is in the nature of assertion that it is governed by this norm. If one performs a speech act that is not governed by this norm, then the speech act is not assertion. This claim has resulted in a huge literature discussing whether there is such a norm. Many people are suspicious of the idea of a constitutive norm. In fact, by and large, the knowledge norm is discussed without any reference to its being constitutive. Some philosophers have characterized the norm of assertion as "epistemic".

"Knowledge is said to be necessary for proper assertion. The propriety here must of course be *epistemic*" (Sosa)

"...insofar as we distinguish the 'epistemic correctness' of an assertion from other aspects of propriety, it may be arguable that knowledge suffices for epistemic correctness (Hawthorne 2004, note 58).²⁰

But asserting is something we do, and as I have argued, it is unclear how there can be epistemic norms for actions. What does it mean to say that one is epistemically required to refrain from asserting something?

While the norm does require the satisfaction of an "epistemic" condition, it does not follow that the norm is itself epistemic. Consider the (simplified) norm: Don't shoot an intruder in your house unless you know he intends to harm you. Even though this norm requires the satisfaction of an epistemic condition, the norm itself is moral rather than epistemic. The lack of clarity in the meaning of 'epistemic' encourages the slide from the norm's containing an epistemic condition, to the norm's being itself epistemic.²¹

While this confusion about the meaning of 'epistemic' is relatively harmless, more serious problems arise in connection with Williamson's more provocative thesis that knowledge is the norm of *belief*. As he sometimes puts it: knowledge is what justifies belief. Ernest Sosa has also endorsed the view, and Jonathan Sutton has written an entire book defending this thesis.²² But what kind of norm does the thesis refer to?

Sutton says explicitly that knowledge is the *epistemic* norm of belief. He holds that knowledge is what epistemically justifies belief. But there is something very puzzling about this claim. As I noted earlier, it is uncontroversial that beliefs can be rationally justified. And it is uncontroversial that a belief can be rational while failing to be knowledge. So what does Sutton mean when he says that knowledge is *the* epistemic norm of belief? Perhaps Sutton is making the peculiar claim that the rationality of belief is not epistemic. If so, then he certainly needs to tell us what he means by 'epistemic'. If one can, without knowing P, be rationally justified in believing p (on the basis of one's evidence), then it is hard to know what to make of the claim that knowledge is required for that same belief to be epistemically justified..

Although Williamson's thesis has been widely taken as a challenge to traditional views about epistemic justification, he does not say explicitly what kind of norm for belief he is talking about. He does connect the knowledge norm of belief to the knowledge norm of assertion. He says that belief and assertion are related as inner to outer. So just as knowledge is the norm of assertion, it is also the norm of belief. This suggests that the knowledge norm of belief, like the knowledge norm of

¹⁹ *Knowledge and its Limits*

²⁰ See also Kvanvig and Brown

²¹ Smythies and Turri on practical reasoning norms as epistemic

²² References. Hawthorne has expressed sympathy for this view in conversation

assertion, is a constitutive norm. But this conflicts with his claim that constitutive norms govern game-like phenomena, where the rules of a game are constitutive of the game. He contrasts game-like phenomena with natural phenomena for which he claims there may be no constitutive norms. Since belief is, in the relevant sense, a natural phenomenon, this account of the domain of constitutive norms conflicts with viewing the knowledge norm of belief as constitutive.

It is unclear whether Williamson intends that the norm of belief is epistemic or constitutive. If he view it as epistemic, he faces the same problem as Sutton, viz. explaining its relation to the rationality norm of belief. If he views it as constitutive, then he can allow that the rationality norm is epistemic. But in that case, Williamson's thesis that knowledge is the norm of belief, does not conflict with the views of other epistemologists who claim that there is a weaker normative requirement for belief. They are talking about epistemic norms. There is no challenge presented by Williamson's thesis that knowledge is the constitutive norm for belief.