

# INTRODUCTION: EPISTEMOLOGY'S ANCIENT ORIGINS AND NEW DEVELOPMENTS

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Developments in epistemology are philosophically interesting for two reasons. The first is simply that they are advancements in the analysis of a core set of concepts—knowledge, belief, truth, and reason. Getting clear about these things is important, just as we should be interested in getting clear about justice, the moral good, beauty, and meaning. These are concepts that reflective humans want to possess and use correctly. They are part of our normative lives, and so we do better when we are right about the concepts and their applications. The second reason why epistemology is philosophically interesting is that developments in our account of knowledge influence how we pursue our other philosophical accounts. So, one's story of why one is right about, say, justice (and how others may be wrong) is one that depends on one's account of what it is to be right about these concepts and how one can demonstrate that. Epistemology, then, is not only of first-order philosophical interest, but it is of concern for second-order philosophical reasons. Views on the nature of truth and the acquisition of knowledge bear on how one sees the breadth of philosophically relevant truths and the methods of one's competitors.

This point about the two levels of philosophical import for epistemology is borne out in the way the transition from mythology to philosophy is discussed when demarcating the beginnings of the ancient philosophical traditions. The relevant transition from the complex of Hesiodic and Homeric poems to philosophical *historia* is posited on the contrast between reliance on testimony given about the gods or through those inspired by them and those who judge by reason and experience. Hesiod's *Theogony* opens with the poet relating how he met the nymphs who tell him the stories of the gods and have given him the ability to relate them accurately (*Theog.* 22-35), and Homer's two epics open with an appeal to the goddess to speak through the poet, and, by extension, the rhapsode relating the poem (*Il.* I.1-3; *Od.* I.1-10). The philosophical tradition is demarcated by a transition to human capacities to reflect upon and endorse the truths on offer. Xenophanes' critique of the revealed religious traditions concedes that independent inquiry does not

guarantee success, but we nevertheless ‘discover better’ with inquiry, as opposed to not inquiring (B 18), and Heraclitus explicitly criticizes the poetic tradition’s hold on the minds of Greeks: “Heraclitus said Homer deserved to be expelled from the contests and flogged, and Archilochus likewise” (B 42). The contrast between the two traditions is clearest in the opening lines of Parmenides’ poem, where the poet is brought up to speak with the goddess, but is given a directive: “judge by reasoning (*logos*) the much-contested examination spoken by me” (B 7). Parmenides’ philosophical program may be put into a poem, like those of the epic traditions beforehand, but the validity of its contents is one to be evaluated on the merits of its arguments, not on the divinity of its source.

Developments in epistemology and developments in philosophical method are tightly connected for the ancients. With Plato, for example, the myth of recollection in the *Meno* is both an answer to a crypto-skeptical challenge, but it is also a description of how Socrates’ method is supposed to work more generally (*Meno* 86b and *Phaedo* 99d). Aristotle’s commitment to saving the appearances is both a commitment to the manifest image and a stand against the reductivism of many of his predecessors, but it is also the statement of his broader philosophical strategy of answering most philosophical competitors (See NE VII. 1145b.3-8 and *Met* I. 985a.10-17). Beyond the classical period, this point is borne out with the Epicurean *kanon* and the injunction that philosophical reflection not extend beyond what is supported by the senses (*Ep. Herod.*, 38). The Stoics required that the *sophos* never err, so they restrict all judgment to those based on *kataleptic* impressions—namely, impressions that are true, caused by what is, and are distinctive in a way that marks them from false impressions (DL 7.47). The combination of the high standards for rational belief and the conflict over the proper criterion for the correct standards yielded the Academic and later Pyrrhonian skepticisms about both the possibility of knowledge and philosophical achievement overall (Ac 1.44 and PH 1.12).

The point of this quick overview is simply to portray the philosophical fecundity of epistemology. I think the ancients are exemplary in this respect, since with their exchanges about these respective philosophies of knowledge, they see that they are, by extension, offering critique of groundings for theories of justice, the moral good, beauty, and meaning. The essays in this volume bear out the broad consequences of the epistemic program in and between the figures prominent in ancient philosophy—views about the gods and their role in the human realm, accounts of the proper criterion for coordinating conflicting moral norms, what role

contemplation plays in a complete life, how widely the critical eye of skepticism ranges, and what one should do when that skeptical eye lands upon oneself, are all at their core epistemological questions, but they have practical and metaphilosophical consequences.

**Harald Thorsrud's** "Sextus Empiricus on the Siren Song of Reason and the Skeptical Defense of Ordinary Life" is a case that, from the Pyrrhonist's perspective, reason's deceptive influence is not merely an epistemic problem, but a practical challenge for reflective beings. Inquirers, like sailors captivated by the Sirens' song, yearn for truth and knowledge. Sextus holds that both the sirens and reason offer only empty promises, ones that bring ruin to those who follow them. Neither knowledge nor the tranquility promised by its pursuit come from this path. The skeptical view that the dogmatic programs neither provide knowledge nor yield tranquility yet seems a product of reason, too. But, as Thorsrud notes, the history of sophisms shows reason to be a trickster, stealing appearances from us, as we see with the rationalist traditions of denying motion, time, and the phenomenal world. The skeptic's skill, then (as noted at PH I.9) is not simply opposing appearances to reasons in any fashion, but in opposing those reasonings, undoing their hold on our minds. This, Thorsrud argues, is Sextus' therapeutic conclusion, one that undoes the effects of philosophical dogmatizing.

**Timothy Roche's** essay, "The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7-8" provides a defense of an interpretation that differs from previous readings of Aristotle's final remarks about happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Roche argues that Aristotle's final discussion of *eudaimonia* is not, as some have alleged, inconsistent with Aristotle's claims about happiness in the previous 9 books of the *Ethics*. Moreover, it is not an exclusively 'intellectualist,' 'inclusive end,' 'superstructure,' or 'approximation' account as others have maintained. Rather, understanding Aristotle's notions of the perfect *eudaimonia* and secondary (or second-rank) *eudaimonia* in *EN* 10 begins with the consideration that the secondary *eudaimonia* is not a life typified by any or every sort of excellent practical activity, but one typified by a specific type of excellent practical activity, namely *excellent political activity*. Once this is point is acknowledged, Roche argues that (1) for Aristotle, the perfect *eudaimonia* involves not only the exercise of theoretical wisdom, but excellent practical activity as well, (2) the contemplative life does not, and cannot, involve the type of excellent practical activity equivalent to excellent political activity, but nonetheless (3) some of the philosopher's happiness consists in a particular form of excellent practical

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activity, namely, the form of excellent practical activity exercised within the contemplative person's personal or private life, the life he lives with family, friends, and associates. Consequently, the perfect *eudaimonia* for Aristotle is not composed exclusively of contemplative activity (as intellectualist interpreters claim). And even though contemplative activity is the primary component of the philosopher's perfectly happy life, Aristotle holds that excellent practical activity makes a direct contribution to the philosopher's happiness. It does so not because happiness is inclusive of all intrinsic goods or because excellent practical activity is an approximation of the exercise of theoretical wisdom, but precisely for the reason Aristotle himself gives—the philosopher is a human being, a being whose most distinctive activity is practical in nature. The secondary *eudaimonia*, by contrast, involves the life of the practically wise and morally excellent statesman, and so on Roche's interpretation, the happiness found in both the contemplative life and the political life necessarily (though in the contemplative life only partially), consists in practically wise and morally excellent activities.

**Maureen Eckert's** "Euthyphro and the Logic of Miasma" is an account of the conflicted state of religious and moral knowledge in classical Athens. Eckert holds that this conflict is in high resolution in Plato's *Euthyphro*. In particular, it is in the puzzle case of Euthyphro prosecuting his own father for murder. Eckert argues that Euthyphro is on good ground from one perspective in holding that the pollution of a murder must be extirpated, but his case is complicated by the fact that to proceed, a son must prosecute his own father, which breaks with norms of filial piety. And so, the systems of purity and pollution conflict with that of honor and shame. Surely only one with the highest expertise in religion and morality would venture to take a strong stand in such a conflicted case, and Euthyphro famously claims that he certainly has it, or else "I should be of no use... and Euthyphro would not be superior to the majority of all men" (5a). It seems that in Euthyphro's case, like the case of conflict between two models of justice in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, it is not so easily arbitrated. In fact, given the way the conflict is portrayed in both Plato's *Euthyphro* and Aeschylus's *Eumenides* (the third of the three in the *Oresteia* trilogy), any of the decisions will have significant difficulty being seen as legitimate by opponents. Here, Eckert holds that the Athenian legal system would need an independent conception of pollution and piety to break the intellectual conflict. The problem, though, is that for Euthyphro, Athena does not arrive *deus ex machina* to resolve the tension between the sets of norms, as she does for Orestes in the *Oresteia*. As

Eckert assesses the situation, “[as] long as the legal system is intertwined with religion, nothing can be settled.”

**Allysson V.L. Rocha's** “Boundless Skepticism and the Five Modes” makes the case that a form of general skepticism is derivable from the interplay between two themes in Sextus Empiricus's Five Modes. In general, the skeptic's arguments are either dialectically tied to their interlocutors, or they are not. If they are tied to their interlocutors, the skeptical conclusions do not risk self-refutation, but they will not yield general conclusions—they are only bad consequences for particular views about knowledge. If the skeptical arguments are not dialectically tied, they are more general, freestanding, skeptical conclusions. But they then risk the problem of self-refutation, as it seems the skeptic proves something with the arguments and the skeptic must have done so with a background theory of knowledge. Rocha's solution is to use Sextus' dialectical tropes as a model for more general conclusions. What Rocha calls the *subjective constraints of interpretation*—that the skeptical modes are applied only to topics that individual skeptics are investigating—is how to stay true to the dialectical orientation of Sextus' skepticism. However, the modes themselves can be applied to whatever it is said about the subject the individual skeptic attends to, and so, even if one is constrained by context for any particular suspension, these are instances of a more general pattern, identified by the Five Modes as a technique for skeptical challenge. The consequence, as Rocha takes it, is that skepticism is limited by the context of use and the interests of the skeptics who practice skepticism's strategies, but this is because the Five Modes, as types of arguments, are more general than their limited range of individual tokens.

**Daniel Larkin's** “A Gift from the Gods: Socratic Knowledge in Plato's Late Dialogues” is a case for centralizing divine inspiration in the theories of knowledge on display in Plato's later dialogues, such as the *Laws*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*. Importantly, the role of inspiration in the early and middle dialogues is quite familiar—Socrates has a *daimon*, the *kalliopolis* of the *Republic* follows the dictates of the Delphic Oracles, and the doctrine of recollection of the *Meno* is one revealed by ‘priests and priestesses’ giving an account of their practice. Larkin's argument is that divine inspiration plays a similar role in the later dialogues, but this role is unique in that the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* and the Athenian of the *Laws* integrate reported divine sources of knowledge into their epistemic and political programs. In the *Laws*, the poets are hailed as divinely inspired, so they can be reliable for their histories. In the *Philebus*, Socrates regularly appeals to the gods for help in deploying his method—in this case, of collection and division (18b).

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Socrates further announces that the gods sent him to keep inquiry alive among humans (*Philebus* 20b), and he reports that the question of the dialogue (namely, whether pleasure alone is a good) was revealed by the gods, too. Larkin concludes that Socrates' wisdom (and the wisdom required to efficiently run a state), even in the later dialogues, is in large part a product of divine dispensation.

**Brian Ribeiro** argues for a radically skeptical interpretation of Cicero's philosophy of religion, what he identifies as an early form of orthopraxic skeptical fideism. The skeptical fideist tradition, associated with Montaigne, Pascal, and Bayle as its early modern proponents, has many plausible ancient antecedents. Socratic claims of ignorance combined with Socrates' stories of what is revealed to him by religious resources (e.g., the Delphic Oracle, recommendations of his *daimon*, reports from religious practitioners about the journey of souls before and after life) is a tempting example. However, Ribeiro is reticent to attribute a full-throated skepticism to Socrates, instead more an inquiring attitude. Alternately, Cicero's Cotta in *De Natura Deorum*, representing the skeptical Academy in critical exchange with Stoic and Epicurean theologies, counts easily as a skeptic. And Cotta, further, is an enthusiastic participant in Roman religion—in fact, he's a *pontifex* (a keeper of sacred rights and official of state religious ceremonies). Ribeiro's view, then, is that Cotta, as a skeptic, holds that though religion's doxastic commitments do not pass critical scrutiny, its practical benefits are still worth pursuing and worth the preservation of the institutions of ceremony. And so, though a skeptic, Ribeiro holds, Cotta is still committed to the orthopraxy of his Roman civic religion. He is, as Ribeiro terms him, an *Academic pontifex*.

**Andrew Cling** argues that Meno's Paradox is an instance of the problem of the regress of reasons. The regress problem arises in this particular case of Meno's challenge by the requirement that all knowledge-about something requires prior knowledge of what that thing is. The regress, then, is one for knowledge *acquisition*, and so it is primarily a problem for going from not knowing anything about something to knowing something about it. If we assume that our knowledge is the product of learning and inquiry (coming to know from ignorance), then it seems that knowledge is impossible. Given this presentation of the regress arising from knowledge-acquisition, the Platonic solution of nativism (that acquisition is only an illusion—we are actually *recollecting these things*) is a clear answer to the challenge. Given that this puzzle is stated as a version of the problem of the transition from non-being to being, Cling identifies an Eleatic influence in the background—that

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Plato's anti-skeptical theory of knowledge is an expression of a deeper Eleatic rationalism.