

THEORY OF INQUIRY

CHRISTOPH KELP

christoph.kelp@glasgow.ac.uk

Preface

Some of the material of this book draws on and further develops ideas that have been published in earlier papers. Here is a relevant overview:

Chapter I

Kelp, C. 2014. "Two for the Knowledge Goal of Inquiry." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 51: 227–32.

Kelp, C. 2018. "Inquiry, Knowledge and Understanding." *Synthese*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-1803-y>.

Chapter III

Kelp, C. 2017. "Knowledge First Virtue Epistemology." In *Knowledge First: Approaches in Epistemology and Mind*, edited by A. Carter, E. Gordon, and B. Jarvis. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chapter IV

Kelp, C. 2015. "Understanding Phenomena." *Synthese* 192: 3799–3816.

Kelp, C. 2016. "Towards a Knowledge-Based Account of Understanding." In *Explaining Understanding*, edited by S. Grimm, C. Baumberger, and S. Ammon. London: Routledge.

Kelp, C. 2018. "Inquiry, Knowledge and Understanding." *Synthese*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-018-1803-y>.

Chapter VI

Kelp, C. 2018. "Inquiry and the Transmission of Knowledge." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
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INTRODUCTION

Let's start with the central methodological idea of this book, which is *to view epistemology as the theory of inquiry*. I'd like to add this: I will not provide a direct defence of this idea. Rather, I will take it for granted and develop in some detail relevant parts of a theory of inquiry. I will also argue that the resulting view allows us to offer novel and promising approaches to a range of old epistemological issues. If my arguments successful, their results will confirm the central methodological idea, thus providing at least indirect support for it.

Some of the most fundamental questions in epistemology concern (i) the *nature* of core epistemic phenomena as well as (ii) their *value* and (iii) the *extent* to which we possess them. My ambition here is to use the central methodological idea to develop new answers to all three of the above questions. The core epistemological phenomena that will take centre stage here are knowledge and understanding. However, my investigation will broach upon a variety of further relevant epistemic phenomena, most notably epistemic abilities, and epistemic sources such as deduction. In the remainder of this introduction, I will sketch the view with a very broad brush. The various chapters will then do the job of filling in the details.

One interesting property of inquiry is that it is a type of activity with an aim. When we are inquiring we are trying to find out something, to settle something, to understand something, etc. A distinction that is of some importance for present purposes is that there are two different types of inquiry.

First, one can inquire into specific questions such as the question of whether Boris Johnson will be Prime Minister of the UK in 2019, whether The Rolling Stones have ever played a gig in Ruanda, when the battle of Hastings took place, who won the Wimbledon mixed doubles competition in 2018, and so on. One claim that I expect to enjoy widespread agreement is that an inquiry into a specific question aims at *settling the question* inquired into.

Question Settling Aim

One's inquiry into Q aims at *settling Q*; alternatively: inquiry into Q aims at *properly closing Q for oneself in the affirmative/negative*.

For instance, an inquiry into who won the Wimbledon mixed doubles competition in 2018 aims at settling who won the Wimbledon mixed doubles competition in 2018, an inquiry into when the battle of Hastings took place aims at settling when the battle of Hastings took place and so on.

Second, one can inquire into general phenomena such as the UK's exit from the European Union, the rise of the Roman Empire, the origins of species, the death of JFK, and so on. Another claim that I expect to enjoy widespread agreement is that an inquiry into a general phenomenon aims at *understanding the phenomenon* inquired into:

Understanding Aim

One's inquiry into phenomenon P aims at *understanding P*.

For instance, inquiry into the rise of the Roman Empire aims at understanding the Rise of the Roman Empire, inquiry into the death of JFK aims at understanding the death of JFK, and so on.

While I expect that some consensus on the aim of the two forms of inquiry is easy to generate, more substantive epistemological questions about it remain. In particular, there are a number of substantive accounts of the both the aim of inquiry into specific questions and understanding on the market. For instance, some have unpacked the aim of inquiry into specific questions in terms true belief, others in terms of justified belief and yet others in terms of knowledge about the answer. Likewise, there are a number of different accounts of understanding on the market, some analyse understanding in terms of knowledge, others in terms of true belief and yet others in terms of justified belief. My own view is that the aim of inquiry of both types is to be understood in terms of knowledge. Inquiry into specific questions – and, in particular, into specific whether-questions, which is what I'll be focusing on here – aims at knowledge that p (not-p). Understanding and hence the aim of inquiry into general phenomena is to be understood in terms of systematic

knowledge that p. Note that while knowledge is key to understanding, understanding requires more than just knowledge: the relevant knowledge must in addition be systematic. That is to say, the various pieces of knowledge must be hooked up in the right way.

It won't come as much of a surprise that knowledge plays a central role in the view I am developing here. Note, however, that this is not essential to the main project of the book, which is to develop the central methodological idea of viewing epistemology as the theory of inquiry. The reason for this is that it is entirely compatible with this methodological idea that some other epistemic phenomenon may have assumed the central place of knowledge instead. That knowledge is of central importance is a function of the methodological assumption in conjunction with a set of arguments. Knowledge must earn its keep as something of key significance. That it does so is by no means a foregone conclusion in the present framework. In this way, the present approach differs from knowledge first epistemology, which has been on the rise in epistemology since Williamson's seminal 2000 book. Now, I do not mean to deny that there are a wide range of affinities between the present approach and knowledge first epistemology. Many of them will become clear in due course. However, it is important to keep in mind that a key methodological idea of knowledge first epistemology is that it takes the distinction between knowledge and ignorance is the starting point for epistemological theorising (Williamson 2010, 208). The present approach does not embrace this key idea. What's more it is entirely compatible with its falsity. Hence, the present approach to epistemology cannot legitimately be placed into the knowledge first camp.

A further idea that is of considerable importance for the purposes of this project is that the above aims are *constitutive* aims of inquiry into, respectively, specific questions and general phenomena. I will defend this idea in due course. For now, I will rest content with saying a few words about what it means to say that the above aims are constitutive aims of our two types of inquiry: they are *essential* to these activities. Anything that does not have settling a certain question as its aim will not count as an inquiry into a specific question. And anything

that does not have understanding a certain phenomenon as its aim will not count as an inquiry into a general phenomenon.

The reason this is so important is that it means that inquiry turns out to be a species of the broader genus of activities with constitutive aims. It is this feature of inquiry that provides the key to all the answers to the fundamental epistemological questions that I aim to address here.

The perhaps most obvious case is that of epistemic value. I will argue that activities with constitutive aims constitute critical domains of value in which the constitutive aim corresponds to a final – i.e. for-its-own-sake – value relative to this domain. This ushers the way to an answer to a particularly hard question in the theory of epistemic norms and values, to wit, exactly which epistemic values are final epistemic values. It also allows us to make progress towards solutions of important value problems in epistemology, which concern the relative value of some key epistemic properties. The perhaps most famous value problem in epistemology is the so-called Meno problem (Plato 1956), which asks us to explain why knowledge is more valuable than mere true belief. It will come as no surprise that my approach to various value problems in epistemology, including the Meno problem, will employ the idea that knowledge is a final epistemic value. Since knowledge is the constitutive aim of inquiry into specific questions, it is a final value relative the domain constituted by this activity. Since true belief isn't, knowledge comes out as being more valuable than true belief.

Again, I expect there to be agreement from the knowledge first camp, in that I expect knowledge firsters to be sympathetic to the idea that knowledge is a final value in the epistemic domain. At the same time, I also expect there to be important differences. In particular, on my view, understanding also comes out as a final value in the epistemic domain. The view I am proposing offers a pluralistic approach to epistemic value. In contrast, I would expect knowledge firsters to be more attracted to a monistic alternative, according to which knowledge is the only final epistemic value.

While it will not be particularly surprising that the idea to view epistemology as the theory of inquiry has the potential to make

headway when it comes to matters of epistemic *value*, especially once we are clear that inquiry is an activity with a constitutive aim, it may be less straightforward that it should do the same when it comes to issues of the *nature* of epistemic phenomena. Perhaps one of the most ambitious aims of this book is to show that it does. More specifically, I will argue the following two points. First, there is a class of activities with constitutive aims that require what is sometimes called a network analysis (Strawson 1992), according to which the nature of the activity, its constitutive aim as well as various other phenomena are constitutively related to one another and can only be understood in terms of each other. Second, inquiry falls into this class of activities and that, as a result, inquiry, knowledge, understanding, and belief are constitutively related to one another and can only be understood via a network analysis. My ambition is to develop this network analysis in some detail.

If successful, this part of the project will lead to novel accounts of the nature of two key epistemological phenomena, knowledge and understanding. Both of these accounts will be non-reductive. In this respect, there are further affinities between my project and knowledge first epistemology, which agrees that knowledge does not admit of reductive analysis. Again, however, there are important differences between the two approaches. Perhaps most notably, my project also offers a non-reductive account of understanding, whereas we might expect knowledge first epistemology to offer a reductive analysis of understanding in terms of knowledge. Second, the non-reductive account of the nature of knowledge my project will develop differs markedly from the standard knowledge first epistemological rival. According to the standard knowledge first account of knowledge, knowledge is essentially the most general factive mental state (Williamson 2000). In contrast, the central idea that my account builds on is that knowledge, as a constitutive matter of fact, the aim of inquiry.

The third central issue that this book will address concerns the extent of our knowledge. In other words, I want to address the problem of scepticism. According to the perhaps most powerful sceptical argument, the argument from ignorance, first, we don't

know that we are not radically deceived. Second, if we don't know that we are not radically deceived, then we don't know much of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know. From this it follows, third, that we don't know much of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know. Standard responses to the sceptical argument deny one of the two premises. Or, to be more precise, in the case of those who deny the second premise, what's denied is the following transmission of knowledge principle that is widely believed to motivate it:

Transmission

If one knows that p , competently deduces q from p , thereupon comes to believe that q , then one knows that q .

Deniers of Transmission typically also hold that we know much of what we ordinarily take ourselves to know even though we don't know that we are not radically deceived (e.g. Dretske 1970, Nozick 1981). The perhaps more popular alternative is to hold on to Transmission and to hold, contrary to the first premise in the sceptical argument, that we do know that we are not radically deceived. In fact, the most popular version of this view holds that we have this knowledge in virtue of deduction from some ordinary proposition that we know, thanks to Transmission (e.g. Moore 1939, Pritchard 2005, Sosa 1999, Williamson 2000).

The view I will develop differs from standard views in that it denies both premises of the sceptical argument. I show that there is compelling independent reason to believe that Transmission fails, especially once we have adopted the book's central methodological idea, and that, as a result, the second premise of the sceptical argument comes out false. While this means that the standard account of how we could know that we are not radically deceived is off the table, I argue that there is a better alternative available. Key to this alternative is the idea that many of us have the ability to recognise whether certain possibilities could easily obtain. It is through the exercise of this ability that we can acquire basic (i.e. non-inferential) knowledge of the denials of various sceptical hypothesis. In this way, the central

methodological idea offers a novel approach to the sceptical problem, one that combines a robust anti-scepticism with Transmission failure.

This completes my initial overview over the central methodological and how it aims to address the perhaps three most fundamental issues in epistemology. To repeat, so far I have worked with a very broad brush. This means that a lot of substantive work remains to be done in the chapters to come. This work will fill in the details of what I have outlined here. However, it will also go beyond the above sketch in that it will address a range of further important issues in epistemology, beyond the central themes of the nature, value and extent of various epistemic phenomena.

A couple of things before getting down to business.

First, a disclaimer: The main ambition of this book is constructive. I am to develop a novel way of approaching epistemological theorising and to use this way to offer a new and systematic treatment of the most fundamental issues in epistemology. Since I want to put the constructive work centre stage, I will spend less time on critical discussion of rival views. I do not mean to say that I don't discuss alternative views at all. Rather, I will restrict my discussion to the closest-in-spirit and most prominent competitors to the various accounts I will develop here. Given the breadth of the project, I hope this restriction can be excused.

Second, here is a game plan for the book:

Chapter I focuses on epistemologically substantive accounts of the aims of inquiry into specific question. It offers a detailed argument that that knowing that p /not- p is the aim of inquiry into whether p and responds to a number of objections against this view.

Chapter II uses the idea that inquiry into specific questions is an activity with a constitutive aim and that knowledge is this constitutive aim to develop a non-reductive account of knowledge. The key idea is that certain activities with constitutive aims do not lend themselves to reductive analysis and instead afford a so-called network analysis in which each element cannot be properly understood without grasping

the connections with other elements in the network. After addressing objections, I compare this account with Williamson's non-reductive account of knowledge as a *sui generis* mental state and argue that my account is favourable to Williamson's.

Chapter III focuses on conditions of knowledge. It argues that for activities with constitutive aims featuring normative properties, it is not uncommon to find substantive constraints on both the means of attaining the aim and the environment. Inquiry is a case in point. I develop a more detailed account of conditions in terms of abilities to know and show how these conditions can be used to solve the Gettier problem. I discuss a number of key objections and offer responses.

Chapter IV moves on to inquiry into general phenomena and develops my non-reductive systematic knowledge account of understanding. I discuss a number of objections to the account and compare it to the most prominent rival views in the literature, to wit, the views that understanding is, in essence, knowledge of explanation (explanationism). Again, I argue that the systematic knowledge account comes out on top.

Chapter IV turns to issue relating to epistemic value. I argue that activities with constitutive aims constitute value domains in which the constitutive aims are domain-relative final values. Applied to the case of the two forms of inquiry, we get the results that knowledge and understanding are final values in the domains constituted by these activities. I show that this enables the account to solve a number of so-called value problems in epistemology, including the difficult tertiary value problem.

Chapter V addresses the problem of scepticism. More specifically, it focuses on a particularly difficult sceptical argument, which proceeds from the plausible claims (i) that we don't know that we are not radically deceived and (ii) that if so, we don't know much at all, to the problematic sceptical conclusion that we don't know much at all. I argue that there is reason to resist both premises of this argument.

More specifically, I present a novel theoretical argument against the principle the knowledge transmits across competent deduction which motivates the second premise. And I develop a new way of resisting the first premise according to which we can have basic knowledge of the denials of sceptical hypotheses thanks to an ability to know that certain possibilities could not easily obtain. Having dealt with some objections, I compare my own approach to scepticism with its closest competitor, the sensitivity based approach, and argue that we have reason to favour the former.