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978-0-521-84213-6 - An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge

Noah Lemos

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## An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge

Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, is one of the cornerstones of analytic philosophy, and this book provides a clear and accessible introduction to the subject. It discusses some of the main theories of justification, including foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, and virtue epistemology. Other topics include the Gettier problem, internalism and externalism, skepticism, the problem of epistemic circularity, the problem of the criterion, *a priori* knowledge, and naturalized epistemology. Intended primarily for students taking a first class in epistemology, this lucid and well-written text would also provide an excellent introduction for anyone interested in knowing more about this important area of philosophy.

NOAH LEMOS is Professor at the College of William and Mary. He is author of *Intrinsic Value* (1994) and *Common Sense* (2004).

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**For my sons, Christopher and Adam**

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## Preface

The theory of knowledge, or epistemology, is one of the main areas of philosophy. Some of the problems are as old as Plato, yet they remain alive and interesting today. This book is intended to introduce the reader to some of the main problems in epistemology and to some proposed solutions. It is primarily intended for students taking their first course in the theory of knowledge, but it should also be useful to the generally educated reader interested in learning something about epistemology. I do not assume that the reader has an extensive background in philosophy.

In writing an introductory text, one must balance many things. I have sought to strike a balance between impartial presentation and advocacy. In general, I have tried to be fair and neutral between competing positions, yet in some places I defend some views. I have also sought to hit the mean between breadth and depth of coverage. I have not tried to cover every important or recent position or to cover every development within the views I discuss. I have tried to focus with clarity on some main features of a few major positions. I hope this approach will be helpful to the reader seeking an introduction to epistemology. I have tried to hit the mean, but as Aristotle says, the mean rests with perception. I apologize for my blindspots.

In chapter 1, I distinguish between some senses of “knows” and note that our primary focus will be on propositional knowledge. I introduce the traditional view that propositional knowledge is justified true belief and discuss in a general way the concepts of belief, truth, and justification. In chapter 2, we consider some problems for this traditional view, problems made prominent in a brief essay by Edmund Gettier. Much of chapter 2 is devoted to considering some simple ways of analyzing or defining knowledge that avoid the problems to which Gettier calls our attention. Unfortunately, none of these are successful, but they represent some basic attempts upon which others have tried to improve. In chapters 3, 4, and 5,

we explore some views about what makes beliefs justified. In these chapters we will look at versions of foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, and virtue epistemology. I have tried not to discuss every version or nuance of these views. Most likely, too much detail would overwhelm the reader and prevent one from understanding the main points of the theory. In chapter 6, I discuss briefly the debate between internalism and externalism about justification before turning to the problem of epistemic circularity. The problem of epistemic circularity arises when we consider how we can know that our ways of forming beliefs are reliable. Can one use a way of forming beliefs to support the belief that that way of forming beliefs is reliable? Can one use memory, for example, to support the belief that memory is a reliable way of forming beliefs? Chapter 7 addresses the problem of skepticism. We consider several skeptical arguments and consider some main responses to them. These include the Moorean response, the relevant alternatives response, the contextualist response, and the inference to the best explanation response. In chapter 8, we turn to the problem of the criterion. We focus on Roderick Chisholm's formulation of the problem and his favored position, "particularism." Throughout much of this book we will appeal to particular examples of knowledge and justification in assessing criteria of knowledge and justification. Is this an epistemically unsatisfactory procedure? In chapter 9, we will explore some views about *a priori* knowledge and justification and consider whether our *a priori* knowledge and justification is confined to what is "analytic." Chapter 10 concludes with a brief discussion of some central themes in naturalistic epistemology.

Again, I have tried to balance breadth with depth and always with an eye to providing a clear and useful introduction to epistemology. I would recommend that anyone seriously interested in studying the subject read this book in conjunction with a good anthology of contemporary essays in the field. In that way the reader will be exposed to more sophisticated and detailed versions of the views considered here.

I wish to thank Hilary Gaskin of Cambridge University Press for her support and patience. I wish to thank several people who read and commented on parts of the manuscript: Erik Wielenberg, Girrard Brenneman, Luke M. Davis, and most especially James Beebe. I wish to thank my wife, Lisa, for her patience and for putting so much on hold while I completed this project. I also thank her for my sons, Christopher and Adam, to whom this book is dedicated.