CHAPTER ONE

Ancient and modern perspectives

A book on ancient epistemology is sure to face the suspicion that its subject is only of antiquarian interest. What, after all, could ancient epistemologists teach modern practitioners in the field? The prospects for a positive answer to this question might, to the untutored eye, seem to dim further when we realise that ancient epistemology is a form of naturalism, that is, an account of cognition in general rooted in an understanding of the natural world to which humans belong and also from which they somehow stand apart as observers or thinkers. Reasonably enough, one might suppose that an antiquated view of nature would inevitably produce a view of human knowledge destined to be antiquated as well. The viability of ancient epistemology will depend on how persuaded we are that epistemology ought to be assimilated to natural science. Modern philosophers are divided over this question. It would, however, be a mistake to try to make a case for the continuing relevance of ancient epistemology by treating it as a forerunner of contemporary *non-naturalism*, roughly, the view that epistemology is largely a matter of logic and semantics and not a legitimate branch of natural science. In fact, ancient epistemology is not accurately represented either as an obsolete or inchoate version of modern naturalism or as a version of the non-natural 'criteriological' approach. It constitutes a third approach. Broadly speaking, from the beginning of ancient Greek philosophy up to Descartes, epistemology was viewed as both naturalistic in its shape and content and as irreducible to the enterprise that we would call empirical science. What this means is a large part of the story that I aim to tell. In this chapter, I shall sketch some basic differences between the ancient naturalistic approach to knowledge and the contemporary non-natural or criteriological approach. In the last chapter, and in the light of the discussion of the theories presented in the central chapters, I shall consider the contrast between ancient and contemporary naturalism.

An obvious preliminary objection to a plan to consider ancient epistemology in general is that it is a mistake to speak of 'ancient epistemology' as

if it were one thing and as if there were not in this period a plethora of divergent theories about what knowledge is. There were indeed numerous rival candidates for the correct account of the nature of knowledge. What makes it possible to speak generally about ancient epistemology is that all the philosophers with whom I shall be concerned shared the belief that knowledge is a natural state or a 'natural kind' and that it is possible to have incorrect or correct accounts of what that is. In this they set themselves apart from all those who think that knowledge is just a belief that meets certain criteria more or less arbitrarily determined. On the latter view, only the belief itself could be a natural kind. Additionally, their shared naturalism is characterised by their view of the anomalous status of knowledge as a feature of nature. Knowledge is as real as a fever or a pregnancy, but it is not an object of scientific investigation in the same way these are.

Epistemological questions are obviously central to a tradition that holds that wisdom is the supreme goal of life and that wisdom is either identical with knowledge or the highest form of it. Many of the issues raised in contemporary epistemology have their analogues in antiquity. It is not possible in one book to treat of all these. I have chosen to focus mainly on the accounts of knowledge and belief, touching on other issues only as needed. A central problem I have had to face is that the English word 'knowledge' is not an entirely helpful translation for any single Greek word. It is usually the word that translates *epistēmē*. For reasons that will emerge, one should not assume that *epistēmē* is related to *doxa* (the word which is usually translated as 'belief'), as knowledge is related to belief, or at least as they are typically related in contemporary epistemology. For example, in English it would certainly be odd to say, 'I know p, but I don't believe it' though one might perhaps say, 'I know p, I don't *just* believe it.' By contrast, Plato and Aristotle, to take two central figures, do not assume that the things of which one has *epistēmē* are the same as the things of which one has *doxa*. To counter that if one has *doxa* of p, surely in some sense one knows or at least *can* know p as well, is to use the word 'know' in a way that does not, generally speaking, correspond to the ancient use of *epistēmē* or its verbal forms. I shall be constantly alerting the reader to the pitfalls of understanding *epistēmē* and its contrast with *doxa* in terms of knowledge and belief.

The quickest way to reveal the divergence of assumptions between ancient and modern epistemologists – especially those whom one may term 'non-naturalists' – is to begin with the so-called Standard Analysis of knowledge that constitutes the starting point in countless contemporary books on epistemology. Here we learn that, a subject S knows p if and only

if (1) p is true; (2) S believes p; and (3) S is justified in her belief. Despite endless discussions about the details of this analysis – especially how to satisfy the third condition – many philosophers still maintain that this is basically the correct analysis of the concept of knowledge.

The Standard Analysis is thought by some to have been first proposed by Plato; indeed, it has been suggested that it is implicit in even earlier discussions of knowledge. I shall argue, however, that Plato rejects the basis for this analysis on the grounds that knowledge is not a sort of belief; it is not belief – even *true* belief – 'plus' something else. The Standard Analysis might be thought to make another sort of indirect appearance in the writings of the Academic Sceptic Carneades, in an analysis of what we might call rational belief. As we shall see, however, Carneades is quite clear that this is not an analysis of knowledge. The real beginning of the Standard Analysis is in the seventeenth century amidst the philosophical analysis performed in support of the new science. Philosophers were then engaged in providing the epistemological foundations for science. The above three criteria – especially the third, justificatory or evidential condition – were obviously crafted with a view to the methods of empirical science. Accordingly, the determination of exactly what counts as a *justified* belief was in the hands of those who were engaged in refining scientific methodology. As a result, the criteria for scientific knowledge came to be accepted as the criteria for knowledge *tout court*. It was not surprising that David Hume would later aver that a 'science of man', including, of course, his cognitive powers, would treat man as a part of nature, not set over against it.[1] Thus were sown the seeds of subsequent attacks on the non-natural approach to epistemology from what could properly be called 'a naturalistic perspective'.

Before we attend to some of the details of the Standard Analysis, it is worth considering what 'the' concept of knowledge is supposed to be. Some concepts like 'fun' or 'adult' divide up or categorise the world with some practical purpose in mind. My concept of fun very likely picks out activities quite different from those picked out by yours. There is no suggestion in this case that I have misused the concept because I apply it to things that you would regard as anything but fun. The concept of fun is not in this case supposed to represent a 'natural kind', something 'out there in the world' with its own distinct nature. There are other concepts – like the concepts of marriage or terrorism or courage – where there is legitimate dispute over whether or not these do or do not represent real features of the world,

[1] See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. and M. Norton (2 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), vol. 1, Introduction.

whether, for example, marriage is what it is regardless of what anyone thinks or whether marriage is whatever anyone happens to conceive it to be or, more likely, what conception is expressed in a law. Still other concepts – like viviparous or gold – are supposed to demarcate real features or things in the world. Although some philosophers have argued that viviparous is no different from fun or adult in this regard, there does seem to be a much bigger problem with the (false) claim that insects are mainly viviparous than there is with the claim that you can be an adult in one country but a child in another.

Returning to the concept of knowledge, it is not difficult to discern a certain ambivalence among those who concern themselves with the ins and outs of the Standard Analysis. On the one hand, if knowledge is like fun, it hardly seems to make sense to argue about the concept of knowledge. Yet, many philosophers do think that argument here is perfectly appropriate and that it might be desirable to change one's concept of knowledge. If, though, we suppose that the concept of knowledge is like the concept of gold, representing a distinct sort of natural thing in the real world, the Standard Analysis itself gives us reason for pause. That analysis tells us that knowledge is nothing but a belief that is true and justified. A belief, though, is true because of some feature of the world, not of the belief itself; and a belief is justified because of something apart from the belief itself, namely, the evidence, that is supposed to justify it. So, if what turn a belief into knowledge are factors in the world independent of the belief itself, we might properly conclude that the only real or objective thing is the belief; the knowledge is just the belief considered in terms of these other factors. There is, in short, only a conceptual difference between a belief and that same belief considered as knowledge. If knowledge is just belief considered in a certain way, should we not agree that the concept of knowledge does not aim to represent a distinct kind of thing in the world as does the concept of gold?

Here is another way of looking at the underlying issue with the concept of knowledge. Scepticism about the possibility of knowledge is either a serious position or a trivial one depending entirely on what we think knowledge is. It is serious if knowledge is something that one really might have or claim to have, and especially if that knowledge is thought to be potentially consequential. It is trivial if knowledge is merely a concept, that is, a set of rules or criteria for the application of the word 'knowledge'. For in this case, whether one knows or not depends on meeting the stated criteria. Yet since these are changeable and even as arbitrary as we like, to be sceptical about whether one knows or not in this sense is rather pointless. For if you

are prepared to count me as knowing owing to the fact that I have met the criteria you have decided to employ, it is to say the least obscure what scepticism in this case is supposed to amount to. Scepticism, which is expressed in the claim, 'well, I doubt whether you meet *my* criteria', is only going to bother one who aims to meet them. This sort of scepticism is not just trivial; it is unstable and transitory. The ancients took scepticism seriously because they believed that the sceptic was challenging the claim that real knowledge was possible for human beings to possess. The 'dissolution' as opposed to the refutation of the sceptics' claim is, in fact, relevant only to knowledge viewed as a concept and not as a real feature of the world.

Let us return to the problematic third condition of the Standard Analysis, the so-called justificatory or evidential condition. Insisting that justification is a necessary condition for knowledge pretty much guarantees that knowledge is going to be viewed in a way that is fundamentally different from the way it was viewed by the Greek philosophers. It is justification – however the details of this are worked out – that is supposed to transform a mere true belief into knowledge. Compare the use of the word 'justification' in a claim of justified homicide. When such a claim is successful it does not turn the homicide into something else; similarly, a justified belief that something is the case is in reality apparently no different from a mere belief that something is the case. In insisting on this condition, there is a further consequence that sets this modern conception of knowledge apart from the ancient. Although one can certainly claim to be justified in one's own belief, such claims are typically subject to contradiction by the judgment of others. We mark the difference by distinguishing someone's claim to know or be justified from the fact that others have determined that the relevant criteria have or have not been met. Of course, 'others' here can even include oneself, as in those cases when we look back at claims we made at a previous time. In short, people are not supposed to know merely because they claim to know.

This 'third-person' or social dimension of justification means that we do not typically acknowledge that someone knows unless we can imagine him having gone through the canonical justificatory process of arriving at his belief. We do not suppose him to possess knowledge unless either we ourselves possess it or we can imagine ourselves possessing it, as in the case when someone knows some fact that we simply do not happen to know at the moment. The consequence of this is that attributions of knowledge (as opposed to mere belief) are meted out in a fairly minimalist fashion. We do not acknowledge others as possessing knowledge in those cases in which

we cannot even imagine how we could arrive at the same point. Nor do we acknowledge others as possessing knowledge in those cases in which we cannot even imagine how that knowledge (as opposed to the mere fact of belief) could be communicated to us by the putative knower. The ancients maintained that 'wisdom' was the name for the most important knowledge, extremely difficult to obtain and equally difficult to communicate, but ultimately life-enhancing in some way. If, again, knowledge is something with its own nature, the possibility of being able to communicate it or even being able to justify one's claim to it is secondary to the question of whether one actually possesses it or not. It is no accident that modern epistemology offers up as paradigm cases of knowledge the most mundane beliefs. By contrast, the massive amount of attention the ancients paid to the question of how significant knowledge was acquired originated in the conviction that knowledge was worth a lifetime to acquire.

One might at this point suppose that the two different conceptions of knowledge I am here sketching really amount to two different kinds of knowledge. So, we might guess that modern epistemology is focused on empirical knowledge, whereas the ancient Greek philosophers were focused on knowledge of non-empirical matters, like the soul, God, the ultimate nature of things, and so on. This is one of those half-truths about the history of philosophy that does a lot more harm than good. For though it is undoubtedly true that some philosophers focus exclusively or primarily on empirical matters whereas others turn their attention to non-empirical matters, the error here is in the assumption that this implies that there are two (or more) kinds of knowledge. More precisely, the error is in supposing that the assumption that there are two (or more) kinds of knowledge is itself not a feature of a view of knowledge fundamentally at odds with the ancient view. The fact that there may be different sorts of things that are knowable does not entail that there are different kinds of knowledge.

In order to answer the question of whether there are different kinds of knowledge, we might begin by asking what makes something knowable. From the perspective of the Standard Analysis, the answer is that whatever can be expressed in a proposition is theoretically knowable because, as this analysis holds, knowledge is *of* propositions. If we press a little further, however, we realise that on this analysis one can only know true propositions. As a result, the question of what is knowable amounts to the question of how we can tell the difference between a true proposition, on the one hand, and a false proposition or a meaningless string of words, on the other. More specifically, it amounts to the question of the criteria for determining the truth of propositions. On this approach, we could either say that

unknowable propositions are those whose truth was indeterminable or, alternatively, we could say that we will only call propositions those sentences whose truth is determinable. In the latter case, we would have stipulated that all propositions are knowable. Yet, even if this is the case, to say that knowability pertains to all and only true propositions is hardly equivalent to telling us what knowledge is.

On the ancient view, along with the rejection of justification as a necessary condition for knowledge goes the idea that knowledge is of propositions. Consequently, the question of what is knowable is not a question of identifying those propositions whose truth can be determined, but of finding out what something must be like to be knowable, that is, to be able to put us in the real state of knowing. Here what is relevant is not semantics but rather something analogous to the question of what makes something edible. Just as we have to understand what eating and digestion are in order to answer this question, we have to understand what knowing is in order to answer the question about the knowable. And understanding what it is is no more a matter of deciding what we shall call knowledge than understanding what digestion is is a matter of deciding what we shall call 'digestion'. As it will turn out in fact, on the ancient view the question what is knowledge and the question what is it to be knowable cannot be answered separately. This is in stark contrast to the view that identifies knowability with true propositions at the same time as it leaves unanswered the question of what that knowledge is that is supposed to be somehow related to propositions.

The idea of non-propositional knowledge is a strange one, especially if one starts with the assumption that knowledge is a form of belief and beliefs are 'propositional attitudes', that is, mental states related to propositions. Propositional attitudes are generally thought to contain imbedded 'that' clauses, as in 'S believes that p' or 'S knows that p'. Certainly, ancient epistemologists recognised, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that there are such propositional attitudes. The question is whether they held that knowledge was one of these. More precisely, we need to ask whether they held that the highest type of cognition – the *ne plus ultra* of thinking, so to speak – was a propositional attitude. If we discover that they in fact did, we might want to conclude that they had no really good reason for thinking that there is more than a conceptual distinction between knowledge and belief. If, on the other hand, we discover that they generally maintained that the highest form of cognition is non-propositional, we shall need to explore the reasons for this striking view.

Speaking in general terms, in ancient Greek philosophy the fundamental division within the genus cognition (*gnōsis*) is between perceiving (*to*

aisthanesthai) and thinking (*to noein*). What differentiates perceiving from thinking are the objects of each: 'perceptibles' and 'intelligibles'. Roughly, the primary objects of perception are the immediate objects of the five senses. The primary objects of thinking, intelligibles, are usually identified by analogy with the primary objects of perception. Just as we can hear sounds, so we can think these objects. Our difficulties rapidly multiply when we begin to try to say more about these intelligibles and how they are related to perceptibles.

First, that which is perceptible is not necessarily *un*intelligible. We can smell cinnamon and cloves and also understand that they smell differently. The intelligibility of the difference seems to rest on some sort of intelligible difference in the smells themselves. Second, we do not just perceive perceptibles, we can perceive or grasp that such and such is the case. This fact would seem to indicate that perception itself can be a propositional attitude. Yet the propositional attitude 'perceive that' is *derived* from and therefore distinct from 'perceive'. For 'perceive that' indicates cognitive activity that goes beyond perception strictly speaking into the realm of belief without altogether leaving the realm of perception itself. The principal point in all this for our present purposes is that the basic division between perception and thinking is the division between primary non-propositional perception that can be worked up into a propositional attitude ('perceiving that') and primary non-propositional thinking that so, it is supposed, can also be worked up into a propositional attitude. The analogy is that just as 'perceiving that' is derived somehow from primary perceiving, so 'thinking that' is derived from primary thinking. In both cases, one should not be conflated with the other.

One might contest the analogy. Thinking, it might be held, is always propositional precisely because it is always derived, whether from perception or from some other physical interaction with the world. Settling this issue will depend on whether thinking is essentially derivative in this way. If we were to answer 'no' to this question, that would not mean that we were committed to the view that all thinking is non derivative, for, clearly, belief in those cases when 'believes that' is equivalent to 'perceives that' is derived. Nevertheless, the derivative nature of the type of thinking that is belief does not entail that thinking is essentially derivative or even that belief is exclusively derived from perception analogous to the way that asphalt is a byproduct of the production of crude oil.

Even if we choose to use the word 'knowledge' for the highest or most perfect type of cognition, and even if we allow that knowledge has a real nature independent of how we stipulate that the word 'knowledge' is to be used, still we might want to insist that knowledge has to be understood

'from the bottom up', that is, as a process or state or capacity arising somehow from a biological or chemical basis. Even to countenance the possibility that what thinking essentially is cannot be understood from the bottom up is to enter a world substantially different from our own. Even though there were philosophers in antiquity – like Atomists, Stoics and Epicureans – who were in principle receptive of a 'bottom-up' approach to explanation, they operated in a milieu in which the opposite approach dominated. As a result, some, like the Stoics, were apt to make claims about knowledge difficult to reconcile with a bottom-up analysis even if they were in principle open to the reconciliation.

We might think to make short work of a view of knowledge that is in some ways the antithesis of the modern view by charging it with an insupportable attachment to folk psychology. After all, it is perhaps the case that the assumption that thinking is not analysable into natural (i.e., physical, chemical or biological) terms is just a result of the inability to imagine how cognition is really at bottom explained by nothing but that to which those terms refer. One need not be an eliminative materialist to hold that all forms of cognition should be understood, broadly speaking, in a bottom-up way. Yet Plato and Aristotle, at any rate, and all their disciples in antiquity thought that cognition could not be thus understood. I would suggest that if they were wrong in maintaining this position, it was not because they were in thrall to folk psychology, for they did in fact have serious arguments to support their view. And unless one assumes that all such arguments must beg the question in favour of folk psychology, it will, I hope, be found illuminating to examine them.

Ancient epistemology differs from modern epistemology in maintaining that knowledge is a natural state that is in essence not reducible to the subject matter of empirical science. The key word here separating the ancient from the modern view is not 'reducible' but 'essence'. As I just noted, there are many contemporary epistemologists who would resist the reduction of epistemology to biology or to physics. For the most part, however, these are philosophers who also maintain that knowledge does not have an essence because they do not think that 'knowledge' names a real thing with its own nature. What one thinks about knowledge in this regard will inevitably affect what one thinks about belief.

The move from 'S believes p' to 'S knows p' invites us to consider knowledge as a type of belief, as I have already suggested. The hypothesis that knowledge has a distinct essence invites a rejection of this move. Consider that if S knows p, it is presumably not the case that S no longer believes p. The putative knowledge is just the belief plus whatever additional

conditions we think have been met, specifically, that the belief be true and that it is justified. This is just another way of saying that knowledge does not have a distinct essence. By contrast, on the hypothesis that knowledge *does* have a distinct essence, that distinctness will be manifested in some way other than by meeting conditions external to the belief itself. It may, for example, be manifested in having objects or things knowable other than propositions, which are the objects of belief. Knowledge would then seem to be the sort of thing such that it is not possible to know that which is believed and it is not possible to believe that which is known.

One may, of course, maintain that we cannot know the things we believe for different reasons. The sceptic may do so in order to cast doubt on the rationality of belief. When the sceptic does this, she depends on an argument that knowledge like, say, immortality, has a real essence but that it is unattainable by us. The non-sceptic may insist that since knowledge does not have a real essence, it is not at all unreasonable just to call 'knowledge' beliefs that are well grounded or justified. From this perspective, the sceptic's stance looks to be nothing if not captious.

The ancient approach, however, insisting on the claim that knowledge has a distinct nature, surmises that we cannot know the things we believe because the only things that are knowable are different from the objects of belief. And yet an obvious objection immediately arises. If belief has propositions as objects, surely there can be propositions whose truth conditions pertain to the things that are supposed to be knowable. So, we can know the things about which we have beliefs just because we can have beliefs about the things we know. Making good on this claim will depend on what the requirements are for 'having a belief about' something.

We have already seen that 'perceiving that' is somewhere between 'perceiving' and 'believing that'. Perhaps it is the case that one cannot have a belief about something unless one perceives it. This is, however, obviously too narrow, for we often have beliefs about things we cannot perceive, including the unperceived causes of the things we do perceive. It is precisely here that some ancient philosophers would want to distinguish a mode of cognition distinct both from belief and from knowledge. Whether *this* mode of cognition is propositional and if so, whether it can be 'about' the same objects that are knowable, is a question requiring exploration.

The different views of knowledge I have been trying to characterise divide over whether or not knowledge has a distinct essence. The ancient view, which maintains that it does, conceptualises the various types of cognition differently from the modern view. Not only is belief really distinct from knowledge, but so is that mode of cognition that does not depend on