

Knowledge and Reality, Lecture 11

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The Aim of Epistemology

Aristotle

Modern Science

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Three Projects

1. Ideal
2. Threshold
3. Improvements

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Not Just Epistemology

In ethics you can do all three.

1. Ideal, e.g., the perfect person.
2. Threshold, e.g., not a moral failing.
3. Improvements, e.g., better ways to live.

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An Important Threshold

In criminal law, the difference between *is a crime* and *is not a crime* is very important.

- This is a threshold concept.
- Not being a criminal is a long way from ideal.
- But it's a very important threshold.

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Pasnau's Big Picture

- We used to care about 1, the ideal.
- We now (or at least in C20) care about 2, the threshold.
- This has been a bad change, and we should go back to the old ways.

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- There are two other features of Pasnau's picture of C20 epistemology.
- It is closely connected to language.
 - It is connected to standards people already internalise.
 - I think all of these are mistaken claims about C20 epistemology, but arguing for that would take us too far afield.

- So here's one way to do epistemology.
- Work out what's good enough for knowledge/rationality/justification.
 - Try to get above that 'good enough' line as often as possible.
 - Pasnau thinks that's too modest a goal, we should aim higher.

- But even if you think threshold epistemology (project 2) is bad, it doesn't follow that you should do ideal epistemology (project 1).
- There's the project of just trying to get better over time (project 3).

- I think Pasnau would say that projects 1 and 3 are too connected to just do project 3 (improvement) without project 1 (ideal). Two possible connections.
1. You can't improve unless you know what you're improving towards, the ideal.
 2. Getting more like the ideal is a way of improving.

- There is (or at least was until recently) a kind of pop Christianity that goes along with this picture.
- Idea is to guide your action by asking *What would Jesus do?*.
 - That is, you try to get better by trying to imitate the ideal. (Or at least what you take to be the ideal.)

- This seems dubious as an approach to ethics, and I suspect to epistemology as well.
- The ideal person never apologises.
 - I'm trying to be more like the ideal.
 - So I'm not going to ever apologise.
 - Wait - that can't be right!!

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Ideals and Improvements

I think there's a deep problem here for people who think about using ideals to generate improvements.

- But I'm going to set that aside for the most part.

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Three Aristotelian Theses

1. Objects have essences.
2. These essences necessitate, cause, and explain, the object's actions.
3. Having episteme requires understanding why the thing is necessary.

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Aristotle as a Sceptic

It is easy to read the third claim as implying that Aristotle is basically a sceptic.

- We can't have episteme of contingencies.
- If episteme just is knowledge, then we can't have knowledge of contingencies.
- And that's a pretty sweeping sceptical claim.

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Aristotle as an Ideal Epistemologist

Pasnau wants to reject that interpretation.

- I'm *really* not going to get into interpretative disputes here.
- Do note that a lot of the claims he makes here about interpretation are disputed.
- Also note how often the argument is *It would make more sense if [philosopher X] meant...*

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Aristotle as an Ideal Epistemologist

Pasnau: The theory in *Posterior Analytics* is a theory of what's ideal.

- It's not sceptical because knowledge doesn't require ideals.

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An Example

Imagine that I stole the cookies, but you don't know this.

- You're trying to figure out who stole the cookies.
- Fortunately, Sumeet saw me steal them.
- Even better, he tells you that I stole them.

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An Example

At this point, you know I stole the cookies, but you do not have episteme of it.

- In fact, you couldn't have episteme of it, for two reasons.
- Only generalisations can be episteme; not particular claims like *Brian* stole the cookies.
- Only necessitations can be episteme; and it's presumably contingent that I stole the cookies.

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Aristotle

Why should we agree with Aristotle that this isn't episteme?

- Because you could do better.
- It would be better to know *why* I stole the cookies.

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Aristotle and the Classical Indians

It's interesting to compare Aristotle to classical Indian philosophers.

- They also cared about ideals, about *proofs*.
- But most of them would say that you're in an ideal position.
- You have a proof (via testimony) that I stole the cookies.

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Aristotle and the Classical Indians

Question: What happens when you learn *why* I stole the cookies.

- For Aristotle, your position on *Brian stole the cookies* improves; you now understand it (better).
- For the Indian philosophers, you get a proof of a **different** question: *Why did Brian steal the cookies?*.

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Aristotle

Let's wrap up Pasnau's interpretation.

- Episteme requires not being able to do better.
- That means it requires optimal understanding.
- That, given Aristotle's metaphysics, requires deriving the result from essences.

The distinctive features of episteme follow from this (plus Aristotle's views on other parts of philosophy).

- Only have episteme of necessities because essences are necessary.
- Only have episteme of generalisations because derivations are via syllogism, and syllogisms involve generalities.
- And so on, but that's enough Aristotle for now.

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1. Reject that we should aim for ideals.
 2. Reject his account of ideals.
- Sometimes it will be hard to tell whether someone is doing 1 or 2.

Since his account of the ideal involves his distinctive metaphysics, in particular the account of essences, you might think that rejecting it would involve rejecting the ideals.

- But Hobbes and Locke rejected the metaphysics, accepted the ideals, and inferred a pessimistic conclusion.

As the last thing I'm going to have slides about, I want to see how we think about these moves in the context of Newtonian physics.

Think about the theory of planetary orbits you get from Newton.

- Given some very general principles (basically the principles of inertia and of gravitational attraction), you can derive the planetary orbits (more or less).
- Kepler had earlier done pretty good derivations of them from his laws of planetary motion.

Newton

But Newton did a couple more things than Kepler.

- He showed how to derive these Kepler's laws from even more general principles.
- And he showed that the same principles could do other things, like explain the tides.

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Two (Related) Objections

But there are still two reasons to be sceptical of Newton's achievements.

1. Action at a distance.
2. The laws themselves still aren't explained. Why do massive bodies attract?

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A Few Responses

1. Sweeping generalisations are ideal, even if they aren't Aristotelian explanations. (Hempel, Kitcher)
2. This is ideal for humans, because it's as good as humans can do, and that's all that ideals should ever be (maybe Newton?).
3. This isn't ideal, and it's not really a step towards the ideal, and that's too bad because (as in 2), it's the best we can do (maybe Locke?)

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For Next Time

We will look more at the notion of the ideal, and something that was quite left out of today - how the epistemic ideal relates to certainty.

1. To argue that the great epistemologists of

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