

What's the Point of Knowledge?

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This book is about the social role of knowledge. The heart of this book is a simple idea: we can answer some of the most interesting and difficult questions in epistemology by reflecting on the role of epistemic evaluation in human life. I call this methodological approach *function-first epistemology*. One of my aims is to reveal the nature, purpose, and value of knowledge by investigating what the concept of knowledge is for. My central hypothesis is that humans think and speak of knowing to *identify reliable informants*. This practice is necessary, or at least deeply important, because it plays a vital role in human survival, cooperation, and flourishing.

While this idea is quite simple, I believe they have wide-reaching implications. My book aims to shed light on the nature of knowledge, the differences between knowledge and understanding, the relationship between knowledge, assertion, and practical reasoning, the semantics of knowledge claims, and an array of other issues. It also makes headway on some classic philosophical puzzles including the Gettier problem, the lottery paradox, and philosophical skepticism. I demonstrate that we better understand all of these seemingly diverse topics once we better understand the role of epistemic evaluation in human life.

This way of doing epistemology is inspired by Edward Craig's book, *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. This work is emerging from a period of relative neglect to occupy a prominent position in contemporary epistemology. I am greatly intellectually indebted to Craig, but the focus of my book is not on exegesis. I argue that my philosophical approach is distinct from Craig's in a number of ways. I also respond to new criticisms, fill gaps he left open, and extend his approach to areas of the epistemological landscape left untouched by his work.

Chapter 1 outlines the method of function-first epistemology and highlights some of its benefits. To illustrate what is distinctive and fruitful about this method, I also compare it with some alternative approaches in epistemology. Chapter 2 provides a preliminary statement and defense of the book's central hypothesis: the purpose of the concept of knowledge is to identify reliable informants. These chapters provide the groundwork required for the rest of the book.

Chapters 3 and 4 attempt to solve a problem that vexes all fallibilist theories of knowledge, namely, how much justification is required for knowledge? I call this the *threshold problem for knowledge*. By appealing to the idea that 'knowledge' is used to flag reliable informants, I argue that we can reasonably determine what level of justification is required for fallible knowledge; further, we can explain why this level of justification makes knowledge valuable.

Chapters 5 and 6 discuss two kinds of pluralism in epistemology. First, there is pluralism about the roles of the concept of knowledge; second, there is pluralism about the cognitive norms that determine what counts as knowledge. These generate prima facie problems for my proposal. Why think the concept of knowledge has just one purpose? And why not think the cognitive norms that determine what counts as knowledge vary with local conceptual or cultural frameworks? I maintain that we speak of knowing for a variety of purposes, but the *primary* purpose of the concept of knowledge is to identify reliable informants. I use this idea to provide a theoretical argument for why language users living in social communities would develop a cross-culturally (and cross-linguistically) shared concept of knowledge.

Chapters 7 and 8 outline a conception of knowledge that connects the social role of knowledge to the work of J. L. Austin. Philosophers are taking Austin's epistemological ideas seriously after decades of neglect, but I develop his ideas in a fresh way. In particular, I defend a pragmatist view that questions the pervasive presupposition that we should account for the meaning of knowledge claims by determining their truth conditions. I also combine Austin's insights on skepticism with my proposal about the social role of knowledge to provide a theoretical diagnosis of skepticism.

Chapter 9 extends the function-first approach to human understanding. I argue that the concept of understanding serves the practical function of identifying good explainers, which is an important dimension of epistemic evaluation. This hypothesis throws light on a variety of issues including the role of explanation in understanding, the relationship between understanding and knowledge, and the value of understanding. In the end, I hope to show that thinking about the purpose of epistemic evaluation constitutes an important and largely neglected source of data that can profitably be brought to bear on debates in epistemology.