

Introduction

This book is about our talk and thoughts about knowledge. Our ways of thinking and talking about knowledge are important input to a theory of knowledge—that is, a theory of *what* we talk about when we talk about knowledge. A certain kind of talk about knowledge has been central to epistemology: *knowledge ascriptions*—assertive utterances of sentences of the form ‘S knows that *p*.’ Knowledge ascriptions are on the tips of our tongues from early in life. In fact, ‘knows’ is among the first mental verbs that we acquire, and it remains one of our favorites throughout life. Likewise, knowledge is at the forefront of our minds. We early and often form judgments that S knows that *p*, and we rely heavily on those judgments in navigating our social environment.

In consequence, knowledge ascriptions play important roles in our lives. Arguably, they are among the most important speech acts that we engage in. For example, the locution ‘we know that *p*’ carries tremendous rhetorical power. To see this, just replace the proposition ‘*p*’ with, for example, ‘they have weapons of mass destruction,’ ‘global warming is caused by CO₂ emissions,’ ‘humans evolved from more primitive species,’ or ‘capital punishment has a deterrent effect.’

To assert that these propositions are known by oneself or someone else is to do something significant and distinctive with one’s words. The proposition is now given a special status. Moreover, we can give someone a stamp of *social approval* by ascribing knowledge to her. Indeed, phrases such as ‘she is in the know’ and ‘she knows what she is talking about’ indicate that knowledge ascriptions are central to many of the social scripts that govern our interactions.

Like many of my fellow epistemologists, I think that reflection on knowledge ascriptions can contribute to our understanding of the nature of *knowledge* as well as to the semantics of ‘knowledge.’ However, knowledge ascriptions serve a large and varied number of communicative roles. When we talk about knowledge, we often talk about a lot more than knowledge. As noted, verbal ascriptions of knowledge guide and regulate our social interactions. So, if we are to learn anything of substance from our folk epistemological talk, we must reflect upon it in a critical manner.

Moreover, in contemporary epistemology, reflection on the ways we *think* about knowledge plays a less significant role than reflection on the ways we *talk* about knowledge. I think this focus on talk over thought is misguided. Our linguistic knowledge ascriptions are typically the expression of our judgments that someone knows. In consequence, the cognitive basis for these judgments deserves to be examined. We

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should think more about how we think about knowledge. A lot of the secrets of our folk epistemological practices can be revealed only by understanding the nature of the cognitive basis of our intuitive judgments about knowledge.

Here broad analogies between folk psychology and folk epistemology are inspiring. Just as folk psychological ascriptions of belief and desire help us predict behavior, folk epistemological ascriptions of knowledge help us assess such behavior. This is why judgments that someone knows or that she does not know are so influential for our social interactions. However, just as our folk psychology is biased, so is our folk epistemology. Given the central roles that knowledge ascriptions play in our social lives, it is important to understand *how* they are biased. Moreover, a better understanding of folk epistemology is important for epistemological methodology. Indeed, judgments about linguistic knowledge ascriptions in imagined cases have played a pivotal role in the theory of knowledge. Philosophers' own judgments as well as measures of laypersons' judgments about such cases are standardly appealed to in epistemological theorizing. However, if such judgments are systematically misguided, they cannot straightforwardly play a role as *data* that a theory must be made to fit. Our folk epistemology can diverge from both common sense and epistemological theory.

At this point, the reader might expect (with either joy or dread) the book to represent a philosophy-hating stance, which seeks to undermine the legitimacy of philosophical theorizing. But few methodological stances could be further from mine. In fact, one of the key methodological theses that I will argue for is that empirical research on folk epistemology *depends on epistemological theorizing*. Without a considerable theoretical grasp of what knowledge is, we would be unable to properly assess empirical findings. So, while we should not uncritically rely on judgments about cases, we should—indeed must—*critically* rely on judgments about cases. Doing so requires plenty of empirically informed reflection, which is best conducted from the armchair. Thus, I do not use empirical results in an ideological attempt to naturalize epistemology beyond recognition. Rather, I seek to contribute to the philosophical foundation required for a fruitful empirical study of folk epistemology. I take this ambition to be a fairly traditional one. Even philosophers in the rationalist tradition can and should be empirically informed. Throughout the history of philosophy they often have been.

The book defends and develops a fairly orthodox view about knowledge that I label 'strict purist invariantism.' Roughly, invariantism is the semantic view that conversational factors do not bear on the *content* of the word 'knowledge.' The brand of invariantism I advocate is a *strict purist* one. Roughly, this is because it rejects that whether someone knows that *p* depends on practical factors associated with *p* or on conversationally salient alternatives to *p*. I will develop the view and specify the terminology as we go along. For now, the key thing to note is that a number of puzzling patterns of knowledge ascriptions challenge strict purist invariantism. I grant, with some qualifications, that these puzzling patterns reflect central aspects of our folk

epistemology. However, I reject straightforward leaps from folk epistemology to substantive epistemological conclusions. Our folk epistemological practices should *inform* epistemology but folk epistemology should not *rule* epistemology.

On the contrary, critical epistemological theorizing may on occasion enable us to better understand the limitations of the tacit folk epistemological principles and pre-suppositions that we rely on in our ordinary life. When things go well, epistemological theorizing may even help us address some of the unfortunate consequences of our folk epistemological practices. These include *epistemic injustices* that sometimes manifest in our folk epistemological practices.

A Brief Overview

The book is divided into three parts, each of which consists of four chapters. It concludes with a brief Coda in which I indicate some ramifications for epistemic injustice.

Part I: Puzzles

In **Chapter 1**, I outline the epistemology that I will defend: strict purist invariantism. Very roughly, this is the view that the truth of knowledge ascriptions does *not* depend on contextually salient practical factors or error-possibilities. Furthermore, I adopt a variety of a relevant alternatives framework that appeals to normal circumstances and a *competence epistemology* according to which S may obtain knowledge only by exercising a cognitive competence. Moving from the epistemological framework to our folk epistemology, I consider ways in which the term ‘knowledge’ is central in ordinary talk. Specifically, I highlight some of knowledge ascriptions’ social and communicative functions.

Chapter 2 consists of a survey of the reflective and empirical evidence for assuming that there are a number of puzzling patterns of knowledge ascriptions. I consider, in turn, three such effects on folk knowledge ascriptions: the first one is a *salient alternative effect*—roughly, the inclination to deny S knowledge that *p* in the face of a salient alternative, *q*. The second effect is a *contrast effect*—roughly, the idea that whether an alternative, *q*, to S’s knowledge that *p* is “in contrast” partly determines our inclination to ascribe knowledge. The third effect is a *practical factor effect*—roughly, the effect of salient practical factors, such as the stakes of the speaker or subject, on our inclination to ascribe knowledge.

I begin **Chapter 3** by taxonomizing the theoretical responses to the puzzling patterns of knowledge ascriptions surveyed in Chapter 2. For example, I provide a characterization of *pragmatic encroachment* that captures a wide variety of views. Moreover, I consider the main lines of argument against strict purist invariantism from the various effects on knowledge ascriptions. The chapter concludes with a discussion of methodology. I argue against DeRose’s ‘methodology of the straightforward’ in favor of an ‘equilibristic

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methodology' according to which it is sometimes reasonable to revise our intuitive judgments in the light of theoretical considerations.

In **Chapter 4**, I go on the offensive and provide arguments against the epistemological views that are motivated by the salient alternative, contrast and practical factor effects. My negative arguments suggest that these effects reflect folk epistemological practices that are useful but systematically inaccurate. So, I argue that taking these effects as straightforward evidence for substantive epistemology views has such problematic consequences that we should consider whether strict purist invariantism may account for them by invoking epistemological, psychological, and linguistic resources.

Part II: Resources

Chapter 5 surveys some empirical psychology and outlines some important folk epistemological principles. I begin by considering the heuristic and biases tradition. On this basis, I argue that ordinary knowledge ascriptions are standardly driven by heuristic processes and, therefore, associated with biases. I integrate this idea in a general dual process framework for mental state ascriptions. Finally, I seek to articulate some of the heuristics and principles that govern intuitive judgments about knowledge ascriptions and the biases associated with them. In particular, I characterize an *epistemic focal bias*.

In **Chapter 6**, I turn to the normative relationship between knowledge ascriptions and action. I argue against a knowledge norm of action (henceforth KNAC) and in favor of an alternative warrant-action norm (henceforth WA). According to WA, an individual must be adequately warranted in believing that *p* relative to her *deliberative context* in order to meet the epistemic requirements for acting on *p*. Thus, I argue that the knowledge norm is an important example of a *folk* epistemological principle that does not pass muster as an epistemological principle.

Chapter 7 extends the discussion of epistemic norms to the linguistic realm. Again, I argue against a knowledge norm of assertion (henceforth KNAS). While KNAS represents important aspects of our folk epistemology, I argue that within epistemology it should be replaced with a warrant-assertive speech act norm (henceforth WASA). According to WASA, an individual must be adequately warranted in believing that *p* relative to her *conversational context* in order to meet the epistemic requirements for asserting that *p*. I consider how this epistemic norm may be extended to assertive speech acts that carry implicatures or illocutionary forces. In particular, I develop a species of WASA that accounts for assertive speech acts with a *directive force* and I do so by focusing on recommendations.

In **Chapter 8**, I connect the discussion of epistemic norms of assertion to pragmatics more generally and to the pragmatics of knowledge ascriptions in particular. I survey some pragmatic theories and focus on recent work in cognitive pragmatics and psycholinguistics. On this basis, I argue that knowledge ascriptions are often used as *communicative heuristics*, which are effective, albeit inaccurate, ways of getting complex epistemic points across. Thus, Chapter 8 concludes Part II of the book by unifying some of its central discussions.

Part III: Diagnoses

In **Chapter 9**, I respond to arguments for pragmatic encroachment that appeal to the communicative functions of knowledge ascriptions or genealogical assumptions. I criticize the methodology of such arguments and raise a dilemma: either the emphasized communicative role is semantically constitutive or it is merely pragmatic. I then argue against the former option and continue to argue that merely pragmatic functions may be accounted for by strict purist invariantism. I then raise another dilemma—Pandora’s Dilemma—for pragmatic encroachment. Many factors other than stakes can have an effect on knowledge ascriptions. So, pragmatic encroachers must either accept that these factors are partial determiners of knowledge or reject this. However, both options lead to trouble.

In **Chapter 10**, I attempt to diagnose the *salient alternative* effect on knowledge ascriptions. The core of my diagnosis of this effect consists in a development of the epistemic focal bias account according to which denials of knowledge in the face of a salient alternative amount to *false negatives*. However, I recognize that other psychological factors may also influence this class of judgments and I argue that a psychological account requires supplementation. In consequence, I integrate the psychological diagnosis with a number of assumptions drawn from cognitive pragmatics.

In **Chapter 11**, I pursue a diagnosis of the *contrast* effect on knowledge ascriptions. Again, I begin by articulating the epistemic focal bias account according to which the contrast effects amount to *false positives*. I then argue that the epistemic focal bias account fulfills an important desideratum of providing a unified account of the contrast effects and salient alternative effects. I augment the case for the focal bias account with a number of experimental results, and, finally, I connect it to some linguistic considerations as well as to the anti-contrastivist arguments from Chapter 4.

In **Chapter 12**, I diagnose the *practical factor* effects on knowledge ascriptions by arguing that they are the result of a combination of pragmatic and psychological factors. I begin by arguing that in the cases which generate practical factor effects, the focus is on an action or decision to act. In the cases where the knowledge ascription is mental, I argue that it serves as a *heuristic proxy* for a more complex judgment about epistemic actionability. Similarly, I argue that linguistic knowledge ascriptions serve a *directive* communicative function in the cases under consideration. Therefore, the “shifty” judgments about the knowledge ascriptions in question reflect whether they meet or violate the epistemic norm governing directive speech acts—specifically, the speech act of recommending. The result is a psycholinguistic account of the practical factor effects.

A brief *Coda* considers the key conclusions and methodology as a *research program* for the study of folk epistemology. Moreover, I tentatively consider how our folk epistemological practices may yield distinctive forms of *epistemic injustice*. For example, I hypothesize that our ordinary knowledge ascriptions may be biased in terms of gender, race, or social power structure. So, I conclude the book by emphasizing a key rationale for engaging in this theoretical endeavor: the study of folk epistemology may serve as the basis for an important area of applied epistemology.

Reading Notes

The book promotes a rather grand epistemological *framework* that touches on many areas which deserve a full monograph in their own right. It is about the nature of cognitive biases. It is about epistemic norms. It is about the pragmatics–semantics interface in the philosophy of language. It is about epistemology. It is about folk epistemology. But, first and foremost, it is about the relationship between epistemology and folk epistemology. In selecting what material to include, I have had to kill many a darling.

However, I have tried to write the book in a manner that makes each topic accessible to novices. For example, Chapter 2 surveys the existing empirical work on knowledge ascriptions. Chapter 5 introduces the psychological aspects of folk epistemology via some textbook material. Chapter 6 introduces the debates over epistemic norms by some general considerations, etc. These chapters contain fairly broad overviews of substantially important material. So, although the book pursues an ambitious research contribution, I hope that its format will also make it apt for teaching. Often, philosophy is taught best by work that pursues novel contributions. That said, I have often taken a couple of steps back to start out with presentations of background materials in order to make the discussion comprehensible for readers who are not already familiar with the debates.

I have structured the book such that readers with special interests or limited time can plot a course through the parts most relevant for them. For example, someone interested in cognitive bias accounts of salient alternative effects can read Chapters 1, 2.3, 3, 4.1, 5, and 10. But someone teaching a course on epistemic norms and pragmatic encroachment could assign Chapters 1, 2.5, 3, 4.3, 6, 7, 9.3, and 12. To facilitate targeted reading, I've included a fairly large number of intertextual references. For easy reference, I have included an Appendix with the principles discussed in the book.

Stylistic Notes

I label cases by italicized capitalization: 'As the case *RED TABLE B* exemplifies...' I have, for the sake of consistency, taken the liberty of altering the format of other authors' labels.

I label principles as follows: 'According to the *Principle of Epistemic Satisficing*...'

I use single quotes to mention words and sentences: 'When the word 'knows' is in sentences such as 'S knows that *p*' it serves important communicative functions.'

I use underlining to mention concepts and thoughts: 'The concept knowledge is acquired early. Thus, a three-year-old may think S knows that p.'

I use double quotes for citation and occasionally to indicate metaphor or semi-technical phrases.

I use italics for emphasis and occasionally to introduce terminology.