

Two ways of doing epistemology

Distinguish two kinds of questions:

Conceptual: What is the (ordinary) concept of knowledge. Roughly, this takes the form of an a priori investigation.

Descriptive/naturalistic project: What is the extension of our concept of knowledge? Is it a natural kind? Roughly, this takes the form of an a posteriori investigation.

In practice, the difference between the two approaches is more one of emphasis, they aren't entirely separate. Conceptual projects depend on the naturalist ones for specifications of paradigm cases and naturalistic projects depend on conceptual ones for specification of the boundaries of the phenomenon. Both take as their starting point how knowledge figures in our everyday language, thought, and action. The respective questions are: What is our concept of knowledge? What is the natural/social kind that corresponds to our epistemic practices?

Problem: here are good reasons for thinking that our everyday language, thought, and action is riddled with sexism (racism, etc) and that our attributions of knowledge are not exempt. And so, the concept of knowledge that is "embedded" in our practice (our concept of knowledge) may well be sexist or otherwise politically problematic.

We can ask three broad questions about our practices:

1. Does gender matter to whether we attribute knowledge to an individual? Does it matter for the domain in which we are likely to attribute knowledge?
2. Are the methods that are likely to count as knowledge-producing more often associated with men rather than women?
3. Are conventions of authorizing individuals as knowers and the social rituals that accompany such authorisation problematically sexist?

Objections:

"Mere Sociology"

Response: But note that if we are interested in the concept/natural kind embedded in our practices, surely such facts are relevant.

Linguistic competence versus performance

Context distorts our attributions of knowledge. But that doesn't mean that the concept itself is sexist.

Locution versus Illocution

Our concept of knowledge isn't gendered. It's just that when we attribute knowledge we don't just assert a proposition. Rather, we perform a socially meaningful act of claiming epistemic authority.

Response 1: But how are we to hone in on "our concept" and pry it apart from contextual misapplications and. Reflective equilibrium? A worry is that this is trying to "purify" the concept of knowledge with tainted tools.

Response 2: And anyway, why should we place so much weight on "our" concept of knowledge in the first place? Shouldn't we ask about which concept we should use to reason? Haslanger:

"Normative epistemology certainly has much to learn from close attention to the ways we proceed epistemically, but to suppose that what we value epistemically is what we ought to value epistemically is to leave the normative part of normative epistemology undone." (466)

A third way: "Ameliorative Epistemology"

Rather than asking "What is knowledge?" we should ask: "What is our purpose in having the concept of X? Is that purpose well-conceived? Which concept would serve the purpose best?"

"The responsibility is both to investigate our purposes in having them (i.e. the concept of knowledge and objectivity), and then to define them in a way that best meets our legitimate purposes." (p. 468)

The project is partly responsive to our actual usage and practices. It's also partly stipulative. It stipulates that this is the phenomenon that we need to think about, let's call it knowledge.

But it also has an explicit normative component. We ask both about which interests/purposes are worth pursuing and which concept best serves those purposes. These are both normative questions.

What are these purposes?

Recall Craig: he characterises them as largely "animal" purposes. We need reliable information for our survival. Haslanger agrees that this is part of the story. However, she suggests that it cannot be all there is:

"knowledge is not, and has never been thought to be, simply true belief, and human knowledge communities and the norms that define them do more than facilitate the gathering and exchange of information: they draw lines of authority and power, they mediate each person's relationship with herself (in defining conditions for self-knowledge), they circumscribe common ground for public debate and the basis for public policy (and much more)." (p. 468)

This means that on an ameliorative investigation of knowledge, political priorities and choices will always be relevant. What's epistemically valuable will partly depend on what is (morally/politically) valuable.

Objection: Considerations of political goals are not relevant to what constitutes knowledge. This is determined by the "rules of the game" of our epistemic practices.

Response: Fair enough. But why should we stick with our practices?