Meeting 1: What Does ‘Epistemic’ Mean?

I. Uses of ‘Epistemic’

One of the central sets of questions we will be asking in this seminar is:

Suppose I am considering whether to believe some proposition, P. What kinds of reasons do I have for and against this belief? Are they exclusively epistemic reasons (such as, for instance, those provided by my evidence for or against P)? Or can they include practical reasons (such as, for instance, those provided by the happiness that believing P would bring about in myself or others)?

Notice that, in setting up this issue, I have appealed to the notion of an ‘epistemic reason’.

One encounters ‘epistemic’ (and its cognates) a lot in contemporary philosophy. Some other instances:

• ‘epistemically justified’ / ‘epistemically warranted’ / ‘epistemically merited’ / ‘epistemically proper’,
• ‘epistemically ought’ / ‘epistemic duty’ / ‘epistemic requirement’ / ‘epistemic norm’,
• ‘epistemic value’ / ‘epistemic good’ / ‘epistemic goal’,
• ‘epistemic responsibility’ / ‘epistemic blame’ / ‘epistemic blameworthiness’,
• ‘epistemic injustice’.

However, it is not always clear what philosophers mean by ‘epistemic’ in these expressions.

II. Cohen’s Challenge

In “Theorizing about the Epistemic,” Stewart Cohen goes one step further: he thinks that ‘epistemic’ functions as an undefined technical term in much contemporary epistemology, and as a result it is not even clear what many of these debates are supposed to be about.

Let us focus on the case that Cohen makes with regard to debates about epistemic justification:

“. . . ‘epistemic’ is a technical term. If you ask competent, even sophisticated English speakers who are not philosophers whether a belief is epistemically justified, they will have no idea what they are being asked” (p. 839).

Cohen is running two claims together here, namely:

1. ‘Epistemic’ is a technical term.
2. ‘Epistemically justified’ is a technical term.

I am fine granting (2), but I would say that (1) is false. Although ‘epistemic’ was originally a neologism (introduced by philosophers in the 19th century), at this point it is a perfectly good word of English meaning ‘or relating to knowledge or knowing’ (Merriam Webster).

(Compare: ‘moral’, ‘morally justified’, and ‘moral obligation’ are not technical terms, but I would say that ‘moral reason’ is a technical term.)

Since we can’t rely on our competence as English speakers to understand what epistemologists mean to be discussing when they argue about the nature of what they call ‘epistemic justification’, Cohen thinks these philosophers owe us a definition of this technical term. But, he argues, there is no good way of defining ‘epistemic justification’ that allows us to make sense of these debates.

In pressing these arguments, Cohen often invokes

the theory-neutral constraint: A definition of a technical term such as ‘epistemic justification’ must be acceptable to all sides of the contemporary dispute about that notion.

Rationale: “Ruling out one side of the dispute simply by description of the subject matter will not make sense of the dispute” (p. 840).
Cohen considers and rejects a number of ways of offering an explicit definition of ‘epistemic justification’:

(Note: Cohen isn’t always clear about whether these definitions are supposed to be semantic definitions of what ‘epistemically justified’ means or metaphysical definitions of what epistemic justifiedness itself is.)

**the doxastic conception:** Epistemic justification is the kind of justification that applies to beliefs.

*Cohen’s objection:* This runs afoul of the theory-neutral constraint, since many philosophers think that beliefs can be morally and prudentially justified in addition to being epistemically justified.

**the alethic conception:** Epistemic justification is the kind of justification related to truth.

What do we mean by ‘related to truth’? Some ways of precisifying this proposal:

- **option #1:** ‘related to truth’ means ‘that entails truth’.

  *Cohen’s objection:* This runs afoul of the theory-neutral constraint, since fallibilists hold that epistemically justified beliefs can be false.

- **option #2:** ‘related to truth’ means ‘that entails probable truth’.

  *Cohen’s objection:* There is no single interpretation of ‘probable’ that allows this to satisfy the theory-neutral constraint: if ‘probable’ is given a frequentist or statistical interpretation, then many evidentialists will deny it, whereas if ‘probable’ is given an evidential interpretation, then most reliabilists will deny it.

- **option #3:** ‘related to truth’ means ‘that involves promoting the goal of attaining the truth’.

  *Cohen’s objection:* This proposal “makes it impossible to distinguish epistemic justification from practical justification” (p. 842). (A worry: there are lots of ways of patching up this proposal to avoid the counterexample Cohen considers.)

  A better way of putting Cohen’s objection: Even an improved version of this proposal violates the theory-neutral constraint, since epistemic non-consequentialists will deny it.

**the knowledge-centric conception:** Epistemic justification is the kind of justification required for knowledge.

*Cohen’s first objection:* This runs afoul of the theory-neutral constraint, since philosophers such as Armstrong, Dretske, Kornblith, Lewis, Plantinga, and Sartwell deny that epistemic justification is necessary for knowledge.

*Cohen’s second objection:* Justification is a matter of satisfying normative requirements. So, on this conception, to be epistemically justified is to satisfy the normative requirements that a belief must satisfy in order to be knowledge. Thus this conception is unable to distinguish an epistemic-justification condition on knowledge from a fourth, anti-Gettier condition on knowledge.

- **worry #1:** If justifiedness is a deontic category, it is more plausibly a form of permissibility than a form of requiredness. (As Cohen himself points out! See p. 846, n. 15.)

- **worry #2:** Cohen is conflating two senses of ‘normative requirement for knowledge’ here: ‘something normative that is necessary for knowledge’ vs. ‘a (deontic) requirement that one must satisfy in order to know’.

Still, I think we can get back a version of Cohen’s objection without positing a link between justifiedness and normative requirement. If some theorist analyzes knowledge as true belief + X (ostensibly an epistemic-justification condition) + Y (an anti-Gettier condition), why is X rather than X + Y what makes for epistemic justifiedness? Both are necessary for knowledge.
Cohen also considers and rejects a number of ways of offering an implicit definition of ‘epistemic justification’.

(More on these in a bit.)

III. Cohen’s Alternative

Cohen has a further aim in his article: he suggests that we would do better to replace talk of ‘epistemic justification’ in contemporary epistemological theorizing with talk of ‘rationality’ (sans phrase).

obvious objection: But since beliefs can be practically rational in addition to being epistemically rational, don’t epistemologists need to specify that they’re talking about ‘epistemic rationality’ rather than ‘rationality’ (sans phrase)?

Cohen’s first reply: I myself don’t think that beliefs (rather than certain desires, actions, or intentions intimately related to belief) can be practically rational. (Moreover, this reply doesn’t violate the theory-neutral constraint because ‘rational’ is not a technical term.)

Cohen’s second reply: If you do think that beliefs can be practically rational, then we can define the type of rationality at issue as “the kind of rationality that applies exclusively to belief” (p. 845). (Presumably he means ‘belief and other doxastic attitudes’ instead of ‘belief’ here.)

This portion of Cohen’s article is, in my opinion, much less successful than the other portions of it.

There are two separate elements to Cohen’s proposal:

First, he is advocating that we do our epistemological theorizing using a normative term sans phrase instead of a normative term with the qualifier ‘epistemic’ attached.

Second, he is advocating that the relevant normative term be ‘rational’ instead of ‘justified’.

But it is the first element that is doing all of the work in his reply to the obvious objection.

Thus a theorist who prefers ‘justification’-talk over ‘rationality’-talk could also reply to Cohen’s arguments by advocating that we do our epistemological theorizing using the non-technical term ‘justified’ (sans phrase) instead of the technical term ‘epistemically justified’.

Moreover, Cohen’s second reply to the obvious objection causes trouble for his earlier arguments that ‘epistemically justified’ cannot be explicitly defined, since if there is a type of rationality that does not apply to anything other than belief (and other doxastic attitudes), presumably there is also a type of justification that does not apply to anything other than belief (and other doxastic attitudes).

Thus Cohen seems to be conceding that the following is a perfectly good definition:

\[
\text{the exclusively-doxastic conception:} \text{ Epistemic justification is the kind of justification that applies exclusively to belief (and other doxastic attitudes).}
\]

Unfortunately, these holes in Cohen’s case for his positive alternative to ‘epistemic justification’-talk threaten to undermine some of his objections to ways of implicitly defining ‘epistemic justification’.

For instance, here is one proposal he considers:

\[
\text{the paradigm-cases conception:} \text{ Epistemic justification is the positive normative status that a belief has in such-and-such standard cases of perception, memory, and inference.}
\]

Cohen’s objection: The beliefs in the paradigm examples all have the property of being rational, so this conception does not distinguish being epistemically justified from being rational.

a worry: But if beliefs can be both epistemically and practically rational, then at most this conception fails to distinguish being epistemically justified from being epistemically rational. So this objection is really targeting the normative term ‘justified’, not the qualifier ‘epistemic’.
IV. Some Other Responses to Cohen

We have already, in effect, discussed a number of responses to the challenge that Cohen presents to those who theorize in terms of epistemic justification. Here are some other possible responses:

1. One might stick to the knowledge-centric conception and address Cohen’s two objections to it head-on.

   In particular, his first objection, in which he invokes the theory-neutral constraint, is not as decisive as the other times he invokes that constraint.

   Cohen says that Armstrong, Dretske, Kornblith, Lewis, Plantinga, and Sartwell deny that epistemic justification is necessary for knowledge. However:
   
   - Some of these authors are best read as denying that there is such a thing as epistemic justification. And if they do, then they can accept the knowledge-centric conception while also denying that epistemic justification is necessary for knowledge. (“Epistemic justification is the type of justification that is required for knowledge” and “It is not the case that there is a type of justification required for knowledge” are compatible.)
   
   - Some of these authors defend views that are best interpreted as being ones on which there is a type of justification that is necessary for knowledge, but they hold otherwise because they make illicit assumptions about what epistemic justification (or, better, epistemic justifiedness) must involve.
   
   - At least one of these authors defends a view that is so implausible that, even if we are observing the theory-neutral constraint, it is line to set this view to one side.

   This leaves the second objection, which is a powerful worry. But it also does not seem knockdown, after we clean up what Cohen says about the (alleged) connection between justification and normative requirements.

2. One might advocate the following variant of the paradigm-cases conception (inspired by the so-called ‘Canberra plan’):

   the platitude conception: Epistemic justification is the positive normative status, if any, that satisfies all or most of the following platiudes:
   
   a. A belief has it in such-and-such paradigm cases.
   
   b. It is required for knowledge.
   
   c. It partially grounds knowledge.
   
   d. It transmits via inference.
   
   [And so on: fill in more plaitudes as you wish.]

   Note that it is compatible with this conception that some of the plaitudes are false. It is also compatible with it that there is nothing that deserves the label ‘epistemic justification’.

3. One might follow Earl Conee in endorsing the following variant of the knowledge-centric conception (see Conee’s “The Epistemic,” pp. 858ff.):

   the looser knowledge-centric conception: Epistemic justification is the kind of justification that pertains especially to knowledge.

   Cohen’s main objection to Conee’s proposal is it does not distinguish between epistemic justification and rationality sans phrase (see Cohen’s “Replies to My Commentators,” p. 907). But we have already seen reasons to be suspicious of this move on Cohen’s part.