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Epistemology, 5 questions, ed. Vincent Hendricks and Duncan Pritchard

1. Why were you initially drawn to epistemology (and what keeps you interested)?

I am a late comer in the field. When I was a student in Paris in the 1970s, historical epistemology was all the rage, and Michel Foucault's views about the history of social sciences were very influential. But his so-called "archeology of knowledge" did not deal with knowledge at all. It dealt with the "will to truth", and knowledge was considered as just what is believed by a community at a certain time and used as an instrument of power. No one ever asked about what knowledge is, and traditional epistemology was ignored. When I turned to analytic philosophy in reaction against these relativist views, my interest did not focus directly upon epistemology, since I thought, with Dummett, that philosophy of language had replaced epistemology in the position of first philosophy. The only epistemological questions that we met had to do with language understanding, and through the various elaborations of a neo-Fregean theory of sense. I actually came to epistemology only when I tried to understand how a Davidsonian theory of radical interpretation for language and for thought could work. It worked with a minimal notion of belief as holding-true of sentences, and with an holistic view of knowledge as coming out of the coherence between beliefs. I focused on the notion of belief, but found the alternative functionalist conception equally unsatisfactory. L.J. Cohen's *Essay on Belief and Acceptance* opened my eyes to the necessity of a different analysis of belief, and I convinced me that believing is a much more complex phenomenon than what current philosophy of mind and cognitive science said it was. I have been attracted by a layered conception of belief, according to which one should distinguish levels of believing: pure dispositional-functional belief, partial belief as degree of subjective probability, belief as assent to propositions or sentences, and belief as acceptance. There are, however, different notions of acceptance. On the one hand, acceptance has been characterised, in particular by Stalnaker and Bratman, as a pragmatic notion distinct from belief: someone can accept that P without believing that P, for strategic, which can be epistemic (e.g. hypothesizing, guessing or arguing for a reductio) or practical reasons, e.g. professional ones. On the other hand the notion of acceptance had been used by Keith Lehrer in epistemology, in order to distinguish it from belief and to emphasise what Lehrer calls the "metamind" dimension of thought, which is for him one of the necessary conditions of knowledge. Trying to understand these various layers of belief, and their interrelations led me both to think about the distinction between practical and epistemic reasons for believing, about the ethics of belief, and about the issue of epistemic justification in general. My Davidsonian first self had led me to rely upon upon the Bayesian conception of belief, which I understood mostly from the Ramseyan point of view. I was then influenced by the work of Richard Jeffrey, Isaac Levi and of Bas Van Fraassen, which all have a strong pragmatist inspiration.

In spite of my attraction for the Bayesian conception of belief and evidence, I could not accept Bayesian bolchevism nor the anti-realism which was implicit in many of these views on the epistemology of belief. Moreover I had always thought that Davidson's answer to scepticism – according to which scepticism is spurious because we cannot but presuppose the massive truth of our beliefs in interpretation – was deeply insufficient. This led me to realise that the epistemology of belief cannot be conceived apart from the epistemology of

knowledge, and that knowledge is not merely a form of rational belief. I now take knowledge, and not simply truth and high degree of subjective probability, to be the aim of belief. If one adopts this perspective, the shape of the layered conception of belief becomes different. Knowledge is much less pragmatically determined than belief, and states of acceptance have also to be defined in relation to knowledge.

2. What do you see as being your main contributions to epistemology?

It is not for me to evaluate what are my contributions to the field, but I can say what I think important. I take epistemology to be a normative discipline, and, I want to take this feature seriously. Like in ethics where there is a division between “normative ethics” and “meta-ethics”— epistemology can be divided into a normative part, which forms the core of the subject – the various conceptions of knowledge and of justification, the various answers to the sceptical problem – on the one hand, and a meta-epistemological part, which deals with the nature of epistemic norms in general, on the other hand. With respect to the former domain, I have defended, like many others, a form of neo-Moorean response to scepticism, and defended what is sometimes called a form of “epistemic compatibilism” - the attempt to combine an externalist conception of knowledge, which I think along the lines of safety principles, with an internalist component. I do not, however, conceive the externalist component as involving a form of skill or credit to the agent along the lines of virtue epistemology, and I intend to stick to a form of (externalist) evidentialism. And I do not conceive the internalist component as involving internal access of the agent to his/her justificatory states.

With respect to the latter domain, meta-epistemology, I have tried to investigate the nature of the normative component in epistemology, especially with respect to the central concepts of belief, of truth and of knowledge, and in trying to understand the specific nature of epistemic reasons. One can conceive the normativity which is attached to the concept of knowledge along the line of a deontological conception of epistemic justification. Alternatively one can take it to be involved in the evaluation of the value of the agent as a knower, along the lines of virtue epistemology. Neither one of these views seems to me to capture the proper nature of epistemic norms. I take these to be constitutive of the concepts of belief and of knowledge, and have tried to spell out in what sense these involve a normative dimension. One first has to formulate the appropriate norms, before assessing how they can regulate our beliefs. The normative component is closely associated to the nature of our reasons for believing, but it should not be reduced to it. It consists in spelling out the basic requirements for a state to be a belief or a state knowledge. Virtue theoretic approaches tend, in my view, to locate within the requirements for knowledge what belongs rather, according to me, to the nature of inquiry. Pragmatists too tend to assimilate knowledge and inquiry. That seems to me wrong. In this sense, I feel more sympathy for classical evidentialism and for a kind of monism about epistemic value (truth and knowledge being the only values), and I mean to resist recent attempts at “expanding” epistemology in the direction of social determinants of knowledge and of features which reveal the contingency of the justificatory links. I am interested in confronting epistemology with its borders, but I think that we should preserve its core from extrinsic elements. For instance I do not think that epistemic states are subject to “pragmatic encroachment” in the sense that practical matters affect the nature of what we know, and of the evidence which is necessary for knowing. Or, for another example, I find it very important to investigate the social determinants of knowledge, but I do not think that epistemology can be “social” through and through.

3. *What do you think is the proper role of epistemology in relation to other areas of philosophy and other academic disciplines?*

Although much of contemporary epistemology tends to become a very specialised field, occupied only with a limited set of problems and circumscribed to a certain kind of literature, it seems to me wrong to insulate it from other fields within philosophy. There are, for instance, a number of structural parallels between ethics and epistemology, between practical and theoretical reasoning, or between epistemology and the philosophy of action. Although it would be wrong to reduce any of these subjects to the other – epistemology is not a branch of ethics for instance, contrary to what a certain kind of ethics of belief tends to say- it is very interesting to investigate the parallels. In the ethics/ epistemology case, this has been done quite a lot during the last two decades, but there is still work to do. To take an example of a useful parallel, why is it that wishful thinking is wrong with respect to belief, but not with respect to action ? Can there be epistemic *akrasia* in the same sense as there is practical *akrasia*? Can we form a belief which we take at the same time as not grounded on enough evidence? It also seems to me fruitful to investigate the links between epistemology and metaphysics, philosophy of science and philosophy of language. In what sense, for instance, is the factivity of knowledge – knowledge is knowledge of facts – related to the familiar ontological doctrine that the world is made up of facts, and does the former imply the latter? What consequences have for the way we conceive scientific knowledge and scientific progress the idea that knowledge is not a species of justified true belief? Good epistemology, as well as good philosophy, must not be narrowly specialised. Much of contemporary work displays this kind of pluralism and of open ended structure of the problems of epistemology, but there is progress to be done in broadening the perspectives. For my part, I have always been interested in the problems of the philosophy of logic, and the issues about the justification of deduction, of the warrant for our logical inferences and of the normativity of logical rules or laws, have always seemed to me to be closely related to those of epistemology in general. The problems of how we can be warranted in our inferences cannot be completely different from those which we encounters with the warrant for our perceptual beliefs, for instance.

4. *What do you consider to be the most neglected topics and/or contributions in contemporary epistemology?*

Neglect is relative, and can go from the complete ignorance of a certain kind of problem or topic to a relative ignorance. I cannot find any instance of a complete ignorance, but some topics seem to me to merit to be moved from a B series status to front screen.

One neglected topic is that of the relationship between what one might call general epistemology – the core issues of the subject which I have called “normative” – and what one might call regional or special epistemology, the epistemology of a specific domain. I think that we should conceive the whole subject in a very systematic way, in the sense, that what is true about knowledge in general should also be true about, say, medical or historical

knowledge. If one intends to resist the kind of epistemological relativism which reigns in many sectors of the history and of the sociology of science, one has to try to connect general and regional epistemologies. Very often abstract philosophy of science or methodology deals with issues which are at too much a distance from actual scientific practice (think for instance of logical theories of belief revision with respect to the kind of theories of scientific progress that historians of science give).

A specific topic which I find neglected and worth investigating, although there are some publications on it (mostly by Edna Ullman Margalit) is the problem of trying to understand what a *presumption* is. Presuming that P is neither believing that P, nor accepting pragmatically that P, nor even a prediction. It is a kind of hypothesizing, but of a specific nature, which we have to understand together with other states of conjectural belief. When Stanley (Henry, not Jason) meets Livingstone, what does he presume? The Epicurians and the Stoics called *prolepseis* the principles that the mind contains originally and which are awakened by external objects in various occasions (see Leibniz, *New Essays*, Pref.). These have a relationship between the status of what we are entitled to believe, and with the issue of implicit knowledge.

Another issue which I find somewhat neglected is the epistemology of memory. There is work on this, but much less than on the epistemology of testimony. It gives rise to the same kind of issues about memory preservation, reliability and entitlement, as those which are the focus of the epistemology of testimony.

I think also that contemporary epistemologists would gain profit from looking at works of the past in their field. In that respect I have always found very illuminating reading writers like Antoine Arnauld (the best analytic philosopher of the XVIIIth century) Claude Buffier (less well known than Reid), William Whewell (shadowed by Mill), Jacob Friedrich Fries (shadowed by Kant and Hegel), Augustin Cournot (shadowed by Auguste Comte), and C.S. Peirce. These examples also remind us that epistemology may be a much more systematic enterprise than it is usually conceived by contemporary epistemology in the analytic tradition.

5. What do you think the future of epistemology will (or should) hold?

I am not good at presuming, even less predicting ! If one looks at present concerns in epistemology, one can predict that some of today's most discussed topics – contextualism, social epistemology, and the self-predicted advent of the so-called experimental epistemology – will continue to attract attention, given the sociology of our discipline. But I predict also that most of these views will at one point or another meet the law of diminishing returns. Not that these investigations are not useful or interesting, but I have strong doubts that epistemology will become an experimental subject nor that epistemology can be social through through. The core of the discipline is, and will remain, *a priori*.

One development which I can predict, and which I would welcome as well, would be an attempt at integrating the methods of epistemology. It would be good if evidence for epistemological views did not come simply from the examination of linguistic intuitions and from the construction of test cases. For instance the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that cannot simply rest on linguistic evidence, but has also to rest on data from cognitive science.

I think also that there has been a tendency – which I attribute here to to a form of parochialism – to consider that epistemologists cannot be metaphysicians, because that are supposed to be concerned with the issue whether we know something and how we know it, rather than with what there is and the properties of reality. It is thus assumed that epistemologists are by definition anti-realists . Much of contemporary epistemology is realist,

and it is continuous to ontology and metaphysics. Similarly, many metaphysicians seem to believe that epistemology of a subject matter is somewhat a secondary and optional kind of investigation, which fundamental ontology can dispense with. But we need to do the epistemology of our metaphysics, and vice versa. So I predict that the field will tend to be understood as much broader and wide ranging than it appears .