

INTERVIEW* WITH RICHARD FUMERTON ON EPISTEMOLOGY
RICHARD FUMERTON İLE BİLGİ KURAMI ÜZERİNE

Richard Fumerton**



4 QUESTIONS ABOUT
EPISTEMOLOGY

BİLGİ KURAMI HAKKINDA
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Q-1 What do you think about the autonomy of epistemology as a discipline? Is it interdisciplinary or not?

Richard Fumerton- I have always thought that epistemology and, indeed, philosophy in general, is fundamentally an autonomous discipline. That doesn't mean that the questions philosophers ask might not be *causally* influenced by discoveries in other fields. Nor does it mean that the answers they give to those questions might not be *inspired* by work in other fields. So, for example, it is probably no accident that the modern philosophers' preoccupation with epistemological problems concerning “subjective” appearance vs “objective” reality coincided with ever increasing ability to magnify ordinary physical objects in such a way that familiar objects seem to disappear into masses of tiny rapidly moving particles (Eddington's two tables).

*This interview was carried out by Halil Rahman Açar, using e-mail.

** Professor of Philosophy at Brown University

Ph. D. Brown University, 1974. His present teaching and research interests include epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and value theory. He is also the author of below books:

Metaphysical and Epistemological Problems of Perception (1985).; *Reason and Morality: A Defense of the Egocentric Perspective* (1990).; *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (1995).; *Realism and the Correspondence Theory of Truth* (2002).; *Mill* (with Wendy Donner, 2009).; *Readings in Political Philosophy* (2012).; *Knowledge, Thought and the Case for Dualism* (2013).

But if there is a philosophical problem of getting knowledge of a mind-independent world of objects and their properties by relying on a mind-dependent world of fleeting sensations, that problem *could* have been discovered simply by reflecting on more mundane cases in which appearance and objective reality seem to come apart. And if there is a solution to the problem, no science is going to tell you what it is. Every science already presupposes the legitimacy of our ordinary epistemological practices without asking those more fundamental philosophical questions.

By contrast, if some version of epistemological direct realism is correct, then again, no science is going to tell you that it is. The arguments for and against disjunctivism, for example, are *philosophical* arguments. Their evaluation involves philosophical training. To get help from those in the sciences, we would need to give them a crash course in philosophy.

To decide what the *fundamental* epistemological problems are, it is useful to make a distinction between metaepistemology and applied epistemology. Metaepistemology seeks to understand fundamental epistemological concepts. When we ask what is knowledge and what makes a belief justified, we are asking metaepistemological questions. Applied epistemology, as the term implies, asks about the application of epistemological concepts. Such questions include: What do we know and what are we justified in believing? The distinction parallels the familiar distinction between metaethics and normative/applied ethics. In ethics, one can't really reach a conclusion about what is even appropriate for philosophers to do in applied ethics until one completes a metaethical investigation. So if, for example, some form of utilitarianism or consequentialism is correct, no philosopher, qua philosopher, is going to be particularly competent to figure out what we ought to do. *Those* applied ethical questions require extensive empirical knowledge from a wide range of disciplines to answer. And even if one is a *sensible* deontologist, one needs empirical information to decide whether a given action falls under the kind that the deontologist thinks is morally significant. One's metaethical view may, or may not, leave room for philosophical investigation into what kinds of things have intrinsic value. That will depend on the right answer to the metaethical question of what intrinsic value is. If you think the Moore of *Principia Ethica* is right, then I suppose the philosopher would certainly be no worse than anyone else at discovering which kinds of things are intrinsically good or bad. But if you think that being intrinsically good is a function of whether a certain kind of person thinking about things from a certain perspective would value those things, it certainly seems that questions of intrinsic value might be better left to psychologists.

Everything I said about ethics applies *mutatis mutandis* to epistemology. So if one concludes that the reliabilist has roughly the right metaepistemological account of what makes a belief justified (noninferentially or inferentially) then it seems to me that there isn't much left for the *philosopher* to do vis a vis figuring out which beliefs *are* justified. That investigation just will be an empirical investigation that can be shared by cognitive psychologists of various stripes. If, on the other hand, certain forms of internalism are the correct metaepistemological positions, it may be possible for the philosopher, qua philosopher, to discover from the armchair whether there is propositional justification to believe this, that, or the other proposition.

In this last comment I essentially put my cards on the table. It does seem to me that it is best to characterize philosophy in terms of fundamental questions that can be answered either a priori, introspectively, or using some combination of the two methods. And philosophers can always turn empirical questions that they can't answer into a priori questions that they can answer by relying on conditionals. I might have no idea what we ought to do as far as raising or lowering corporate income tax, for example, but if I have the right metaethical view I might be able to tell you what we ought to do if the empirical facts are such and such.

One might worry that the above comments are unnecessarily polemical, and I would concede that to some extent metaphilosophical questions are often answered stipulatively. The history of philosophy and the history of epistemology, for examples, ask questions that can't be answered a priori or from the “armchair,” but then, for that very reason, I have always thought of those fields as more on the edges of philosophy, as fields informed by systematic philosophy but significantly different from it.

Q-2 What would you say about the relationship between metaphysics and epistemology? Do they overlap?

Richard Fumerton- There are different ways of understanding what makes a philosophical question a metaphysical question. I should begin by making clear that I think that certain questions concerning the analysis of concepts should be included among the metaphysical questions. With that caveat, I do believe that there is a strong overlap between metaphysics and epistemology. One can't really do one without the other. Whenever a philosopher makes a metaphysical claim, critics will raise epistemological questions about how that claim is supposed to be justified. But discussion of justification for believing a given proposition inevitably raises metaphysical questions concerning the truth makers for the proposition in question and the truth makers for what is offered as justification. So to take a familiar example, philosophical problems of perception involve epistemological and metaphysical dimensions. We might start with an epistemological question concerning how (if at all) our perceptions justify us in believing various propositions describing the physical world. But we won't get very far without asking metaphysical questions concerning the *nature* of perception and the *content* of propositions describing the physical world. Is veridical perception a matter of some internal subjective state being caused in the right way by the presence of a physical object? If it is, what is the nature of these internal states? Are they brain states, non-physical qualia, intentional states whose representational content is a physical object? What is a physical object? Do we literally understand the physical only in relation to subjective sensation or do we have an understanding of the physical that is independent of our understanding of sensation?

What is true of epistemological questions concerning our justification for believing propositions about the physical world through perception is equally true of similar epistemological questions concerning our justification for believing propositions about the past relying on memory. The first step in even addressing the epistemological question would be to get clear about just exactly what memory is? Can we make a distinction between veridical

memory and apparent memory (seeming to remember)? Is seeming to remember a constituent of actually remembering? Are there important differences between kinds of apparent memory (episodic, propositional, seeming to remember how, etc.)?

Epistemological questions that arise in the philosophy of science will lead to metaphysical questions concerning the status of theoretical entities. Metaphysical positions in the philosophy of science will raise crucial questions concerning how we know the extension of various scientific concepts.

On my own view, our understanding of noninferential justification is parasitic upon our understanding of direct awareness. But the claim that there is such a relation as direct acquaintance is a metaphysical claim. And when challenged the metaphysical claim raises again epistemological questions. How do we know when we are and when we are not directly acquainted with the truthmaker for a given proposition?

Q-3 What are your opinions about psychologism in epistemology, and about the relationship of epistemology to psychology and sociology?

Richard Fumerton- I don't have much to add to my answer to question 1). Applied epistemology *may* involve disciplines other than philosophy. But if they do, then it isn't pure philosophy any more. The investigation has become cross-disciplinary. There is nothing wrong with cross-disciplinary investigation. But to understand cross-disciplinary fields one should first try to understand the disciplines that are working together to answer certain questions. Metaepistemological truths will dictate what disciplines other than philosophy might be necessary to answer questions of applied epistemology.

Q- 4 What would you say against critiques of epistemology (for instance, those concerning the death of the subject or of epistemology)?

Richard Fumerton - Philosophical controversies don't die easily. We are still trying to answer Plato's question in the *Theatetus*: What must be added to true belief to get knowledge? For hundreds, if not thousands, of years we've been trying to figure out what makes a belief justified/rational. Epistemological questions concerning how we move from knowledge of subjective appearance to knowledge of objective reality are just as important today as they have been for millennia. Epistemology is alive and well, and given the nature of philosophy, I can't imagine those questions having uncontroversial answers in the foreseeable future. The failure to reach consensus isn't a function of the questions being in some sense illegitimate. The failure to reach consensus is a mark of just how difficult it is to answer fundamental philosophical questions.