

# Pure Epistemology

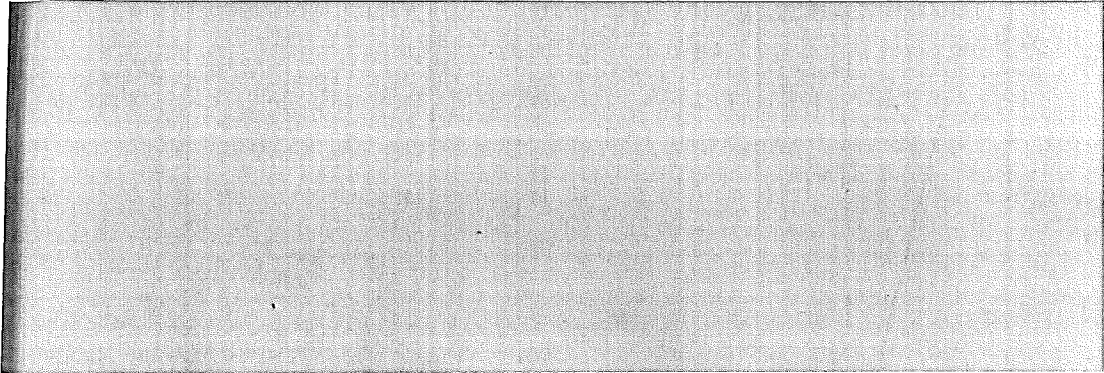
Presidential Address

Peter Hutcheson

If a philosopher describes his philosophy as "pure epistemology," just what does that mean? Is it possible and, if so, desirable for a philosophy (or part of it) to be purely epistemological? What does the fact of knowledge, if it is a fact, imply about the knower? As I address these questions it will become clear that I am indebted to Husserl, but I do not claim that this is an essay on his philosophy. Indeed, it has been argued that Husserl's own characterizations of his phenomenology are sufficiently ambiguous to justify several different interpretations of his philosophy. Moreover Husserl changed his position on several key philosophical issues. This is part of the explanation that has been offered for the belief that phenomenology is not a vigorous *practice*—not the use of an identifiable method to tackle philosophical problems—but a moribund and scholarly interpretation of texts.<sup>1</sup> Here I do not intend to concern myself with a precise interpretation of Husserl's texts. Rather, I shall philosophize *with* Husserl. If this paper does not deviate too much from the historical Husserl, it might be called an essay in Husserlian phenomenology.

To say that a philosophy is purely epistemological is to describe it as committed to identifying and examining presuppositions and as free from metaphysical presuppositions and propositions. A presupposition is an unrecognized (and thus unexamined) assumption, whereas a metaphysical proposition states that there exists (or does not exist) an entity of a certain kind [a theoretical claim about the kinds of things that exist (or do not exist)]. The two features of pure epistemology are related, for the commitment to the identification and examination of presuppositions and freedom from metaphysical propositions are the outgrowth of a conception of philosophy as dealing with the most fundamental questions. Pure epistemology is supposed to be free from existential commitments, recognized or not. That is why I say "metaphysical propositions," and not just "metaphysical presuppositions."

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Perhaps the best way to clarify the concept of pure epistemology is to contrast it with an epistemology that is not pure, one that has metaphysical presuppositions. Consider Berkeley's philosophy of perception. According to this theory, physical objects *are* collections of sense-data. In order to avoid the objection that this implies that physical objects exist intermittently, Berkeley first points out that the discontinuous existence of things is not a consequence of subjective idealism. Second, in apparent response to the objection that the discontinuous existence of physical objects is a consequence of subjective idealism *and* the reasonable premise that there are times when physical objects are not perceived, Berkeley argues that the apparently reasonable premise is in fact false because God perceives things when finite minds do not. The hypothesis of divine perception, however, has the unwelcome consequence that things never begin or cease to exist, since God perceives or knows things eternally. In order to account for the fact that things begin and cease to exist, Berkeley suggests that angels are the cause of things beginning to exist (to us). Berkeley's God also accounts for the passivity of our (ordinary) perception.

In Berkeley's theory of perception the existence of many things is postulated: God, causal relations between God's sense-data (i.e., physical objects) and finite perceivers, angels, and sense-data. This is a prime example of a theory in which metaphysical propositions are used to explain how we know. Epistemology is thus theoretically secondary, whereas metaphysics is primary. It is noteworthy that Berkeley's theory is *not* realistic, and yet epistemology is secondary.

But a critic might reply that there is a reason for not explaining knowledge in terms of reality. If anything, the situation would seem to be the reverse of this picture, for it is fair to ask how and whether a philosopher *knows* that the metaphysical propositions are true. How do we know, for example, that God exists and that there are causal relations between physical objects (God's sense-data or ideas) and finite perceivers? How do we know (if we know at all) that there are sense-data in the first place?

It is not as if philosophers who explain knowledge in terms of reality have not answers to questions about how to account for knowledge of their theoretical propositions themselves, and Berkeley is no exception.

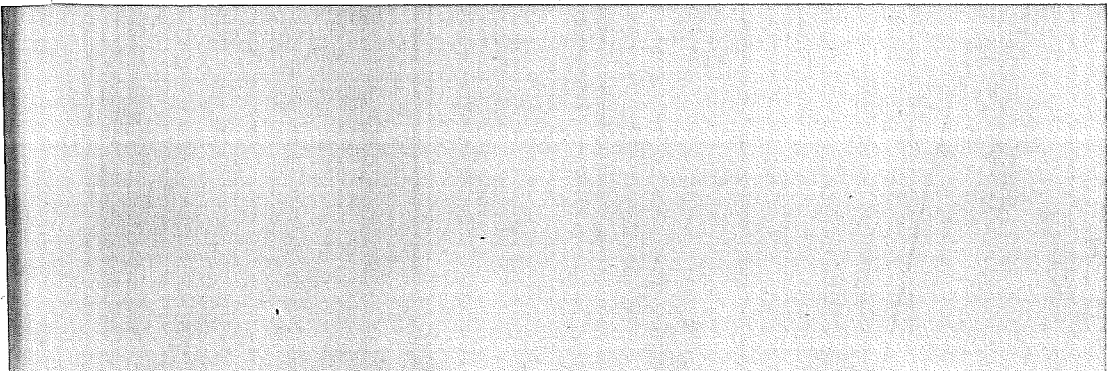
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After all, he argues for the claims that God exists and that non-perceivers exist only if they are perceived. But if Berkeley's theory is typical, I think I can make a case for the conclusion that those theories would have been better, had they begun with a systematic attempt at pure epistemology. Let me show why.

How might Berkeley's theory have been improved by a systematic attempt at pure epistemology? If Berkeley had set aside assertions about what exists and does not exist, then he would have refrained from claiming that unperceived material things do not exist and that real things, which are nothing but collections of sense-data, do exist. There would be no question of invoking the existence of God or of angels. Thus, Berkeley would not have faced the problem of intermittency in the first place, as he would not have made the metaphysical claim that engendered it. Likewise, he would not have faced the problem of too much continuity, for he would not have appealed to the existence of God to solve the problem of intermittency (or *discontinuity*). Berkeley was willing to appeal to the existence of various supernatural entities rather than regard the need for such an appeal as a warning to reexamine the premises that led to it.

But is it generally desirable to try to do philosophy with this methodological restriction? Although it would prevent Berkeley, Descartes and company from invoking the existence of God to solve epistemological problems, refraining from claiming that things exist would also imply that someone like Locke could not postulate the existence of physical objects to explain our perception. It would also rule out arguments for the existence of anything, including the traditional problem of the external world. This is why it is perhaps not desirable for one's philosophy to consist of *only* phenomenology, but to begin with it. It should be added that the methodological restriction would *not* rule out analyses of what it would take to know that something exists or arguments for the conclusion that it is not known that something exists, since such analyses and arguments do not imply the existence or non-existence of anything. Thus, depending on one's concept of philosophy, being neutral about what exists might not be too restrictive.

Insofar as philosophy is supposed to address the most fundamental questions, and answering questions about what does and does not exist



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presupposes that there are answers to prior questions about what the relevant propositions mean and what it would take to know them, it is desirable to begin philosophy with an attempt at philosophy that is purely epistemological.

I say "attempt" advisedly, for I have not argued for the conclusion that pure epistemology is possible. Consider this argument for its possibility:

We must address epistemological questions first, but can we attempt to answer them without committing ourselves to metaphysical positions? If we can analyze and clarify what it would take to know that something exists without claiming to know that it exists, then we can address epistemological questions independently. Insofar as the conditions for knowing that something is true (or that something exists) leave open the possibility that the conditions are not satisfied, it is possible to answer those sorts of epistemological questions without being committed to any particular metaphysical position. In brief, it seems that pure epistemology is possible.

But that conclusion does not follow. It does not follow that there is no commitment to any metaphysical position *at all*, but only that there is no implied commitment to the truth (or falsehood) of the metaphysical proposition *under examination*. Thus an epistemological analysis of the conditions for knowing that there are material things does not imply that there are (or are not) any material things, although such an analysis might involve commitment to some other metaphysical propositions. Thus, the argument does not prove that pure epistemology is possible.

But just what does "involve" mean in the statement "such an analysis might involve a commitment to other metaphysical propositions?" Does it mean that the propositions that *comprise* the analysis might imply the existence (or non-existence) of various things? Or does it mean that the propositions describing the conditions for knowing that the theoretical propositions themselves are true might or do imply the existence (or non-existence) of various entities? Thus, suppose that a philosophical analysis of, say, the conditions for knowing that there are material things consists of propositions A, B, and C, none of which implies the existence of material things. But suppose that the conditions for knowing that A, B, and C are true include the truth of proposition X, which does imply the

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existence of something. Hence, even if we were sure that the propositions that comprise the analysis were neutral about existence, the conditions for knowing that the analysis itself is correct might not be.

I believe that this is in fact the case, inasmuch as the existence of a knower is implied by the knowledge that any analysis is true. Thus, if the thesis that pure epistemology is possible meant that the conditions for knowing that a philosophical analysis is correct must be metaphysically neutral, then pure epistemology is impossible. Even if it meant only that the propositions that comprise philosophical analyses must not imply the existence or non-existence of anything, then pure epistemology might still be impossible, for every analysis might have unforeseen metaphysical implications. But there would have to be some specific reason for claiming that there are such implications. Otherwise the argument for the impossibility of pure epistemology would rest on the mere unknown *possibility* of existential implications.

The existence of a knower is an implied condition for the possibility of a known philosophical analysis. Can this knower be characterized further? How is its nature related to the (otherwise) existential neutrality of pure epistemology? Husserl's name for the methodological device whereby conceptual questions are systematically separated from questions of contingent fact and existence is "phenomenological reduction."

Consider these arguments for claiming both that phenomenological reduction is a necessary prelude to philosophy and that there is a pure subject. Epistemology must be independent of metaphysics because epistemology is the examination of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge about being. If epistemology involved any metaphysical commitments, a self-undermining skepticism would result. If the truth of a metaphysical proposition M were a precondition for knowledge, then we are faced with the question of how we know M is true. Either M is true or false. If M is false, then there is no knowledge. If M is true, then the argument for its truth would be question-begging. It could thus be doubted whether M or anything else is known. Besides, if M is a proposition about our biological constitution, then doubts about whether it precludes knowledge of things as they are immediately arise. This skepticism, however, is self-stultifying, since it undermines the claim to know that M is true (as opposed to seeming to be true to any human).

Skepticism is thus a consequence of either horn of the dilemma. Epistemology must, therefore, begin by suspending judgment about metaphysical propositions. Epistemology must be metaphysically neutral. Epistemology must, in short, begin with phenomenological reduction.

But what of the knowing subject? If the epistemological subject is conceived as human—as part of the world—then its biological constitution could prevent knowing things as they are. If the epistemological subject is a part of nature, then its alleged “truths” can be relativized to human capacities and sense organs, which would reintroduce a form of skepticism. Thus, if knowledge of truths (no scare quotes) is possible, then there must be a pure, transcendental subject.

Suppose that a skeptic tried to reply to the first argument in this way. It is alleged that if a metaphysical proposition *M* were a truth about our biological constitution, and we advocated the thesis that *M*'s truth precludes knowing things as they are, then that would be self-defeating inasmuch as the claim to know that *M* is true would be defeated by the skeptical hypothesis itself.

Now it would be self-defeating to contend exactly that. But suppose a skeptic does not claim to know that *M* is true or to know that its truth precludes knowledge of things as they are. Suppose a skeptic claims that there is more reason to believe those two propositions than any alternative. That would not be self-defeating, and yet it would undermine the argument for phenomenological reduction or an epistemology that is metaphysically neutral. This skeptical reply would not be an argument for knowledge of *M*'s truth, but for its being more reasonably believed than any alternative. Thus a skeptic could avoid one horn of the dilemma, namely, “if *M* is true, then the argument for knowledge of its truth would be question-begging.”

But it can be replied that the skeptic apparently knows what it takes for a belief to be more reasonable than its alternatives. Our biological constitution does not preclude knowledge of that truth. It cannot be replied that it is more reasonably believed that, say, *X* and *Y* are the conditions for reasonable belief than any alternative, since that would lead to an infinite regress.

The infinite regress would be as follows: if the skeptic claims not to know, but to believe more reasonably than any alternative, that *M* is true

and that M precludes knowledge, then the skeptic could be challenged to show how he knows what the criteria for reasonable belief are. let us say, for the sake of argument, that there are two and name them X and Y. Thus the skeptic's appeal to reasonable belief in X and Y justifies the belief in M. If the skeptic replies to our challenge to show how he knows that X and Y are true by saying that he does not claim to know them, but only to believe them with more reason than any alternative, then there is a tacit appeal to a criterion for reasonable belief. Now the criteria cited for the contention that X and Y are proper standards for reasonable belief are either X and Y themselves or different from them. If they are the same, then the skeptic's argument is question-begging; and so he would not have proven that X and Y (and thus M) are more reasonably believed than any alternative. The only rational option is for the skeptic to appeal to criteria that are not the same. If they are not the same, then we have new grounds, say Z and A.

But this leaves the skeptic's argument vulnerable to the challenge how he knows that Z and A are true. If the reply is that Z and A are more reasonably believed than any alternative, then we are clearly embarked on an infinite regress.

Should we object to this infinite regress? One reason for objecting is that if it is allowed, then we never reach a point at which the skeptical thesis is justified. The challenge to justify it is just put off at every stage. To this a skeptic could reply that the criticism is a tacit requirement that justification constitutes more than reasonable belief, a thesis for which there needs to be a good argument. A skeptic's critic could fire back that there is no unacknowledged requirement for more than reasonable belief. The point is that, because there is an infinite regress of so-called "justification" it is never *shown* that the skeptical thesis meets *its own* standards.

But suppose a skeptic retorts that the infinite regress only shows that the question, whether there is knowledge that is independent of biological conditions, cannot be resolved. The skeptical position and its non-skeptical antitheses are in the same boat.

I have two replies. First, this reply would amount to abandoning the claim that it is more reasonable to believe the skeptical thesis than its counterpart. That would water down the skeptical doubts to such an

extent that there is no reason to prefer it. This response, there, will not do. A skeptic must maintain at a minimum that it is more reasonable to believe the skeptical thesis than its alternative.

Second, the skeptical thesis can be turned against itself, whether the position is formulated in terms of knowledge or reasonable belief. If a skeptic advocates the claim that X and Y are the criteria for reasonable belief, then he must admit that his biological constitution might cause him to have false beliefs about the standards for reasonable belief. It might be the case, for all a skeptic knows, that if his biological constitution caused him to have true beliefs about the criteria for reasonable belief, then those criteria and additional information would imply that there is much more reason to believe that there *is* biologically-independent knowledge than that there is not. Suppose a skeptic's biological constitution caused him to have false beliefs about the criteria for knowledge.

Suppose that true beliefs about the criteria for knowledge would lead to the conclusion that there is biologically-independent knowledge. Given the skeptical hypothesis, there is simply no reason to prefer it to these opposing claims. Therefore, there is simply no reason to justify the skeptical doubts.

But does this justify the *positive* thesis that there is knowledge that is independent of biological conditions? No, but it does reinstate an argument for the necessity of phenomenological reduction (and thus the desirability of a phenomenological approach to philosophy) that the skeptical argument threatened to undermine. We shall have to consider the second argument—the one for a transcendental subject—to defend the thesis that there is some knowledge that is independent of biological conditions.

It might be objected that the skeptical hypothesis questions the very possibility of phenomenological reduction and thus of biologically-independent knowledge. And since the exchange left the matter unresolved, it will not do to infer that the argument for the necessity of phenomenological reduction has been reinstated. For that contention presupposes that there are positive grounds for the belief that biologically-independent knowledge is possible.



I have two replies. First, the claim that the first argument has been reinstated is vulnerable to this objection if it is construed as an example of biologically-independent knowledge. However, the contention that the argument is reinstated should be construed as the weaker claim that it has not been undermined by skeptical doubts. Second, the argument is imprecisely described as being for the necessity of phenomenological reduction. Rather the argument is for its necessity if epistemology is to consist of knowledge without scare quotes. That conclusion does not imply that there is such knowledge unless the conditional statement *itself* is interpreted as a tacit claim to biologically-independent knowledge. And although I think that it is, I am not entitled to say so until I can show that the radically skeptical hypothesis is false.

I think I can show that by pointing out the knowledge of a knower. A condition for the possibility of knowledge that transcends biological conditions is that there exists a knower who has the ability to transcend those conditions. Husserl, following Kant, uses the term "transcendental" to mean "condition for the possibility." So, if there is knowledge, then there is a transcendental knower. This knowledge is reflexive inasmuch as the example of knowledge that transcends biological conditions is a knower's knowledge of existence. One's biological condition could not cause one to have the *false* belief that a knower exists, since, if that belief were false, it would be impossible to have any beliefs at all, true or false. Thus, the radically skeptical thesis is false.

I have carefully avoided characterizing this knower as "I," for *I* am not a precondition for knowledge, although *a* knower is. Moreover, I am mindful of Hume's and Russell's criticisms of Descartes's *cogito* argument. I know that a knower transcends biological conditions in knowing that a knower exists *at that particular time*. Of course, this will obtain *whenever* a knower contemplates its existence. But I have not shown that a consciousness that knows itself at one time is *the same* consciousness that knows itself at some *later* time. And that would need to be shown in order to justify the use of the pronoun "I," as that word implies some continuous existence through time. There is a second, independent reason for now characterizing this knower as "I." This pertains to the descriptive content of the knower. I side with Sartre and

the earlier Husserl and against the later Husserl in thinking that this consciousness is not "personal."

Let us return to the question with which this paper began. What does "pure epistemology" mean? Is it possible and, if so, desirable for a philosophy to be purely epistemological? What does the fact of knowledge, if it is a fact, imply about the knower? We saw that if "pure epistemology" implies freedom from all existential commitments whatsoever, even those that are implied by the knowledge of philosophical propositions themselves, then pure epistemology is impossible.

But if "pure epistemology" means analyses that are from existential propositions, then there is every reason to believe that pure epistemology is possible. That is, there is every reason to believe that it is possible to separate conceptual matters from matters of contingent fact and existence. In other words, there is every reason to think that phenomenological reduction is possible. To be sure, a particular analysis might have hidden presuppositions. But there would need to be a dissection of it to justify that claim. That differs from the general thesis that every analysis must have existential presuppositions. I argued that an attempt at pure epistemology is desirable even if it is not self-evident that it is possible, insofar as it involves addressing prior questions first. Last, there exists a knower that transcends biological conditions if there is knowledge without scare quotes. This knower is transcendental in that it is a condition for the possibility of knowledge.

I have said that a knower transcends biological conditions inasmuch as it knows. Can it also be said that the knower of philosophical truths transcends *its* biological conditions, or does the claim that the knower is human involve a category mistake, as Mohanty has claimed?<sup>2</sup> I shall address that question in another article.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1. M.M. Van de Pitte argues for this view in "Phenomenology: Vigorous or Moribund?," in *Husserl Studies* 5, #1 (1988), 3-39.

2. J.N. Mohanty, "Intentionality and Noema," *Journal of Philosophy* (1981), pp. 706-707.

3. I am indebted to Jeffrey Gordon for some helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.