

Is Fallibility an Epistemological Shortcoming?

Abstract

A familiar form of skepticism supposes that knowledge requires infallibility — the ability to “rule out” all possibilities of error. This requirement plays no role in our ordinary epistemic practices. Barry Stroud has argued that this is not a good reason for rejecting a skeptical argument; our ordinary practices do not correctly reflect the requirements for knowledge because the appropriateness conditions for knowledge attribution are responsive to practical and conversational factors. Recent contextualist semantics for ‘knowledge’, too, hold that our attributive practice is responsive to such factors. However, this view is incorrect. Ordinary epistemic evaluations are guided by our conception of the person’s standing with regard to the reasons that there are for and against the truth of the belief. Thus, the objection from our ordinary practices is upheld. Fallibility is not an epistemological shortcoming, and a convincing skeptical argument must use only requirements which figure in our ordinary epistemic practices.

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