CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Epistemic Responsibility

If a North American motorist rents a car in Britain and proceeds to drive on the right-hand side of the road, thereby causing an accident, the courts will not accept as an excuse that he or she did not know that one drives on the left in Britain. One who takes the wheel of a car has a responsibility to know the rules of the road. So it is with civil and criminal law in general: ignorance does not exonerate in instances of violation. A householder who throws rubbish over the fence onto the neighbor's roses cannot acceptably plead ignorance of the laws pertaining to another's property; nor is a landowner who sprays trees with a noxious chemical exempted from responsibility for any attendant, wider environmental damage simply because of avowed ignorance about the possible effects of insecticide. People engaging in such activities are expected to have a reasonable degree of knowledge about their consequences and implications.

Analogous examples can be suggested from a broader political context. Although many Germans claim not to have known what was happening in Nazi concentration camps, and thus argue that they cannot reasonably be held accountable, others believe they should have made an effort, that in not knowing, they were derelict in what can plausibly be declared a responsibility. Similarly, when a new contraceptive drug is declared safe on the

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basis of broad latitudinal testing but inadequate longitudinal studies, protesters can reasonably declare that no drug so tested can responsibly be pronounced safe. Such a pronouncement would not be so different from the claims of nuclear scientists to people living near test sites that there was nothing to fear. Without first carrying out adequate investigations to produce knowledge, it is irresponsible to make such declarations. So, too, South African upholders of apartheid, who claim to know that blacks prefer to live in "their own" communities for they are not at ease in white society, may well be uttering propaganda statements based on inadequate investigations of the preferences of blacks.

Similar considerations arise in the personal domain. In a friendship, one is expected to know what counts as a confidence and what is information for public consumption. A breach of trust will not readily be repaired even though the one who broke the confidence was not actually told that the item in question was confidential. This is but one instance of the kinds of things one needs to know about other people to conduct personal relationships well. Such relationships generate a complex set of responsibilities that can be fulfilled only by cultivating an appropriate sensitivity to the other person's situation.

In these examples, I adduce a set of claims about expectations and responsibilities. In each case, a responsibility *to know* is at issue, and it is to that responsibility that I wish to draw attention. It is true that, in many of the cases, it is the action(s) based upon the inadequate or carelessly arrived at knowledge claims or beliefs that come under public scrutiny and that seem to invite moral and/or legal censure, for the consequences of being wrong are serious. But it is instructive, for *epistemological* purposes, to focus upon the assumed or alleged knowledge itself, to consider what is involved in the contention that there is, often, a responsibility to know, or at least to know better than one does.

The points I have raised in these examples about our responsibility to know are neither new nor startling. They articulate familiar, if often implicit, aspects of our experiences about the place and status of knowledge as the basis for action in everyday life. I shall propose, though, that examples taken from commonplace occurrences in ordinary cognitive activity are significant

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for theory of knowledge. In fact, I shall outline an approach to theory of knowledge that turns questions about, and conditions for, *epistemic responsibility* into focal points of explication and analysis. Central to this approach will be the view that knowing well is a matter of considerable moral significance; hence, moral issues and questions of "character" are often integral aspects of epistemic evaluation. I shall maintain that one is frequently in a better position to understand how, or what, a person knows, and to understand the implications of that presumed knowledge, when it can be placed in the context of the putative knower's character. Concentration upon questions of this nature—upon questions about the moral implications of knowledge claims and about the character of would-be knowers—will yield a new perspective on the knowledge-seeking enterprise.

Looking at cognitive activity from this perspective raises a different set of questions about knowledge from those posed in the two leading approaches to theory of knowledge: in foundationalist and coherentist theories. These new questions are not posed to challenge coherentist or foundationalist ways of thinking, however. Indeed, to an extent, they are suggested by certain coherentist and/or foundationalist insights.

The central concern of foundationalist epistemology is perhaps best captured in the question with which Bertrand Russell opens *The Problems of Philosophy:*[1] "Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it?" Foundationalists share the belief that Russell's question can be answered in the affirmative, that knowledge claims discovered to be "so certain" can stand as the basis—the foundation—of a system of knowledge. They hold that a body of knowledge is composed of separate (or separable) "pieces" or "parts" and that a nonsymmetrical relation, analogous to the relation of physical support, holds between the foundations and the rest of the system. Foundations are understood to be a special, primary part or set of parts; therefore, they bear a relation to all the other parts of the system, which none of these parts bear, reciprocally, to the

[1] Bertrand Russell, *The Problem of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 1.

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foundation. Just as the base of a pyramid supports the rest of the structure yet the higher levels do not support the base, so foundations support a system of knowledge.[2] Some foundationalists, of whom Descartes is the outstanding example, assume that knowledge claims arrived at by deductive reasoning from a "clear and distinct" starting point will themselves be just as clear and distinct. Their clarity and distinctness derives from the clarity and distinctness of that starting point. Others, in particular some of the logical positivists as well as empiricists such as Russell himself, Moore, and Ayer, hold that the degree of certainty in knowledge claims diminishes as one moves away from the core, or foundational, propositions.

Although these common, central foundationalist concerns can be identified, it is not possible to go on to elaborate a single, monolithic foundationalist doctrine, for foundationalist theories differ from one another, particularly with respect to the degree of certainty they require of foundations. According to the strictest of such theories, foundations, to qualify as such, must be absolutely, timelessly certain. According to modest foundationalism, however, foundations should be only as certain as possible; indeed, they may even be corrigible, though not of all the foundational propositions of a system could be declared uncertain and in need of amendment at the same time. As the contrast between Descartes, on the one hand, and Moore, Russell, and Ayer, on the other, shows, foundationalism cannot be straightforwardly aligned either with rationalism or with empiricism.

For coherentist epistemology, the source of evaluation and justification of a belief or knowledge claim lies in its relations with other beliefs or "knowns" within a system; explanatory relations or relations of probability or logic might be taken into account. To be considered justified, a belief must fit, without causing contradictions or other problems of inconsistency, into an interlock-

[2] I owe this brief account of foundationalism, together with the image of the pyramid and some of the discussion of coherentism which follows, to Ernest Sosa's account in his article, "The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy V*, eds. P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., and H. K. Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980). It will become apparent from the following chapters that Sosa's work has had an important influence on my thinking.

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ing system of mutually compatible truths. No belief is more fundamental than any other within the system. Classical instances of coherence theory are found in the great rationalist metaphysical systems, such as those of Leibniz and Spinoza, and in German and British idealism. Some coherentists, such as Neurath and Hempel, see the systems of pure mathematics and theoretical physics as paradigmatic for showing how the coherence relation works: all the statements of these systems are related to one another by relations of logical implication. Indeed, purists might argue that a coherence theory can justify only such analytic or a priori claims, that to move away from the paradigm of mathematics or physics and apply coherence criteria to a posteriori knowledge is, in fact, to work with an entirely different theory. Others argue, and plausibly I think, that coherence within a theoretical system is just as important a criterion for assessing knowledge claims within the empirical sciences as is the degree to which those claims are grounded in experience. Indeed, in fields of enquiry such as history, coherence is of crucial importance, for the possibility of checking knowledge claims against real events is remote, if not nonexistent. In such disciplines, though, one does not deal exclusively with criteria of coherence: at some points, the system must establish contact with the "real" world.

There is a wide spectrum of positions, all of which can reasonably be designated coherentist, within modern epistemology. Some recent work, less tied to the deductive model than the work of Neurath and Hempel, emphasizes the significance of explanatory coherence. The goal of enquiry might be described, in Gilbert Harman's words, as that of arriving, by a process of inductive inference, at "the best total explanatory account."[3] By contrast, Keith Lehrer gives considerable weight to what one might call "subjective coherence": the need for a reciprocal adjustment between the coherent system of knowledge and/or beliefs a person employs in moving about the world (what he calls a person's "acceptance system") and a putatively "new" knowledge

[3]cf. Gilbert Harman, *Thought* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 158ff.

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claim, which is in the process of becoming part of the system.[4] A new claim is acceptable and a knower reasonable in accepting it only to the extent that it fits with the system of what is already known. And Lawrence Bonjour, who explicitly ties his coherentist position to a realist metaphysics, argues that there simply is no good reason to believe that one objective world would, in the long run, provide "coherent input to incompatible systems."[5] Coherence, presumably, will manifest itself in an ultimate synthesis of compatible knowledge claims.

Questions about epistemic responsibility take some of their thrust from what are best called the "empirico-realist" implications of some versions of foundationalism. There is a realist imperative at the center of all the exhortations to responsibility I have cited in my opening examples: an insistence that responsible knowledge claims can arise only out of investigations, in part empirical and inductive, that attempt to discover how things really are, both actually and potentially. To this extent, questions about epistemic responsibility arise out of sympathy with some conceptions of the foundationalist project: the goal is to ensure that knowledge claims are well-grounded in the world, that they respect the constraints the world imposes upon those who would know it.

Responsible knowers are uneasy about possible inconsistency and incoherence within their own system of knowledge and within "public" systems of knowledge that they are tempted to endorse or inclined to reject. Many of the examples cited at the outset require would-be knowers not to turn aside from, or attempt to explain away, aspects of experience that do not fit with what they can reasonably claim to know. Indeed, claims about epistemic responsibility in some of these cases suggest that, if the putative knowers had been appropriately alert to the incoherence of certain claims (say, about the drug or the nuclear test)

[4]See Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974); and especially his "Knowledge, Truth and Ontology," in *Language and Ontology: Proceedings of the Sixth International Wittgenstein Symposium* (Vienna: Verlag Holdler-Pichler-Tempsky, 1982).

[5]Lawrence Bonjour, "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 30 (1976): p. 303.

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within the wider context of scientific knowledge, even as it is accessible to the lay public, they would not have rested content with thinking they knew.

Having said that, however, it is important to state that this project arises out of a certain disenchantment with foundationalism and coherentism. It is probably true that these approaches, separately or jointly, represent the best efforts of epistemology so far to approach "the problem of knowledge." They can neither reasonably be rejected outright, nor can they be set aside as having completed their project. We still really do not know what it is (that is, *understand* what it is) to know even the simple fact that "This is green." Nonetheless, part of my disaffection with traditional epistemology has to do with what can only be seen as an aridity, manifested in the amount of discussion devoted to questions just like that one: analyses of how our simple perceptual and inductive beliefs are justified. My intention is neither to minimize the importance of these questions nor to deny that there is much work to be done in these areas. These problems are enormously difficult ones whose solutions would be of paramount significance for the future of epistemological enquiry. Efforts to show and understand the extent to which knowledge can be founded and efforts to construct as coherent a system of knowledge as possible must surely be recognized as fundamentally important to any philosophical enterprise. But enquiry within established foundationalist/coherentist discourse is, by and large, conducted under the assumption that a fairly well-understood range of questions and possible answers demarcates the permissible focus of epistemological debate. The implicit view often seems to be that, if epistemologists could get clear about what justifies our claims that this is a hand and that is a doorknob, then all the rest would follow. In other words, such propositional claims, once explicated, would provide paradigms for the explanation and justification of all knowledge. Yet philosophers are aware, too, that even when these problems have not been solved, other questions about knowledge can be raised and debated fruitfully: questions that form the core of debate in the philosophies of science, social science, or law, to name but a

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few examples. Many of these enquiries are conducted in a context totally lacking such simple paradigms, yet intricate and subtle questions about the nature of knowledge can still be posed.

I am suggesting, then, that it is possible to look at human cognitive activity in another way and to ask quite a different set of questions about it. My point is not so much to claim that traditional epistemology has neglected the issues I shall address but to maintain that there is a choice about what questions are to be considered central in discussions of human knowledge-seeking activity. Only by approaching this activity from a different perspective will it be possible to provide the missing complement to foundationalist and coherentist theories. I shall therefore outline an approach that raises questions and puts forward proposals about what counts as good cognitive activity that slip through even the most carefully constructed foundationalist or coherentist nets. Furthermore, I shall show that this project can be undertaken without waiting for traditional epistemological tasks either to be completed or abandoned.

My emphasis upon cognitive *activity* is intentional and important. The major contrast between the line of approach to be developed here and the predominant tradition is in the way this new position moves away from a concentration upon products, end-states of cognition. It turns, instead, to an examination of process, of efforts to achieve these end-states. It does so from a conviction that concentration upon products restricts the possible results of enquiry in two ways. First, and perhaps implicitly, it construes the cognitive subject as a featureless abstraction, a constantly repeated element in a consistently repeated operation where the cognitive activity of that subject is not itself open to significant epistemological scrutiny. Second, concentration upon end-states grants them an unwarranted finality, making them seem implausibly definitive, static, and removed from the flux of cognitive process. Consequently, the dominant tradition forces the analysis and evaluation of knowledge into unreasonably constricted molds.

My intention is to shift the emphasis of investigation and evaluation so that knowers, or would-be knowers, come to bear as

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much of the onus of credibility as "the known" has standardly borne. The discussion will focus upon how everyday, practical, epistemic life provides the context in which knowledge, belief, understanding, *and* epistemological questions themselves can be developed. It will concentrate upon the concerns real knowers have, in complex situations, about being responsible in their cognitive endeavors. I will take as my point of departure the strong claim that experience grounds knowledge; there will be no attempt to arrive at a description of "pure" knowledge that might somehow prescind from or transcend experience.

The conceptual apparatus for such a shift in the focus of enquiry is available, at least in essence, elsewhere in the philosophical tradition. I take the Kantian conception of a creative synthesis of the imagination to be one of the most important innovations in the history of philosophy. It provides a conceptual framework that can account for the active nature of human cognition, taking and structuring experience to the extent allowed by the world and human cognitive capacities. These two factors, the nature of the world and of human cognitive capacity, impose strong constraints upon the form and content knowledge as (interim) product can have. Although neither "the world" nor human cognitive capacities can be assumed to be immutable, they constitute an objective, if shifting, framework within which the creative synthesis must take place. Within these constraints, however, there is considerable scope for freedom in making sense of the world. Any account of knowledge that recognizes this degree of creativity, therefore, must, at the same time, recognize a need for cognitive imperatives to limit what kinds of sense can *responsibly* be made of the world.

It is undeniable that human flourishing is deeply dependent upon knowing well. Human beings seem, for the most part, to be concerned to conduct their epistemic lives well, whether from a conviction that knowledge is valuable in its own right or for prudential, pragmatic, or less morally condonable reasons. Taken together, these normative and empirical considerations suggest that even a contrived thought experiment of the "Suppose there were only one person in the world . . ." variety would have to

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recognize epistemic pressures, giving rise to rudimentary epistemic imperatives. At the most primitive and practical level, these imperatives would arise simply out of a need to know and to assess one's situation as well as possible for the sake of survival. They would be unarticulated, implicit in the situation. A Robinson Crusoe, despite his isolation from society, retains the pressure of such imperatives in a more articulated, socially oriented form. Arguably, such articulation is possible only because he has already been part of society, and knowing about his circumstances beyond what is necessary for simple physical survival has become part of what is involved (epistemically) in keeping his bearings. Clearly, though, even in such situations, one does better, in some specifiable senses, if one knows well.

My intention, then, is to develop a descriptive analysis of some of the central problems and imperatives encountered by people trying to conduct their epistemic lives as well as possible, seeking to know, to understand, and to arrive at well-warranted beliefs. This task is neither a purely fact-finding mission nor a mere exercise in conceptual analysis. Knowing well, being epistemically responsible, have implications for people's individual, social, and political lives. This account, then, is not purely descriptive, if that is thought to imply description without evaluation. The intention is, rather, to show that some varieties of epistemic proceedings are better, more responsible, than others.

Several additional assumptions need to be made clear. I have stated that the fundamental premise of the enquiry is that actual human cognitive practice is the proper and appropriate focus of epistemological investigation. It is thus maintained from the outset that the *Lebenswelt,* the world in which human cognitive agents live and experience and know, is in every way as real as (and indeed in many ways more real for human beings than) the world described, for example, in scientific theory, in terms of elementary particles, or of mathematical formulae. A central tenet of my position is that theorists of knowledge should avoid thinking in terms of an inferior order of "appearance" that contrasts with a more absolute "reality," thereby implying that this "reality" is the only proper object of knowledge. I do not mean that pre-

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cisely the same modes of explanation will do for every way of regarding experience, only that the scope of epistemological enquiry must be able to encompass both of these often differentiated realms without privileging either one.

Second, in stating that there is often a responsibility to know better than one does, I am assuming that there are degrees of knowledge, ways of knowing more or less well, that still qualify as knowledge. This point is masked when simple perceptual examples such as "The book is on the shelf" are taken as paradigmatic knowledge claims, for here knowledge is plainly an all-or-nothing affair. Either I know or I do not know that the book is on the shelf; I cannot know it a little bit or to a certain extent. I can, however, know a little bit about the dangers of certain drugs or of nuclear testing; I can know too little, in fact, to make responsible knowledge claims or to act reasonably on the basis of my alleged knowledge.

Third, I am not assuming there are constant, readily discernible distinctions to be made amongst knowledge, belief, and understanding. I shall not always list these as separate (or separable) object(s) of the study; rather, I shall use the terms somewhat loosely and often interchangeably. Reasons why it is not vital to draw tight lines around them, separating one from another, will become clear in the course of the discussion. The emerging picture will be better for this inexactness. My aim is to understand epistemic life as it is, not in a tidied-up, abstracted version.

Fourth, and concomitantly, it is by no means clear that these processes (that is, knowing, believing, and understanding), either singly or together, fall into the dubious category of "states of mind." One might consider them to be "states of persons" or "states of organisms" without, however, endorsing any static implications. They seem to be the products of dispositions or capacities that are amendable to cultivation and control. It is not essential, though, to arrive at a correct way of characterizing these complex (and often overlapping) processes. Indeed, part of the disaffection that gives rise to this book has to do with a persistent thrust in epistemology toward classifying, and hence

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oversimplifying, what is involved in these processes. The insistence upon getting clear about what they are in some essential sense tends, above all, to obscure what makes them most worthy of study: the wonder of them.

A governing belief that creates much of the impetus for my enquiry into these issues bears reiteration: there very probably cannot be a perfect, ideal theory of knowledge that ties things together in a tidy way. To deny this possibility is not, however, to affirm that we must remain forever mystified. The route I propose is indirect and tentative, but it is redeemed by its fertility and its capacity to remain in touch with the need to account for what happens when real human beings try to make sense of their experience. The approach is not invalidated by the fact that, *ex hypothesi,* there is no neutral standpoint from which the enquiry can be conducted, for a theorist's efforts to understand are part of the same knowing process that is often separated out as the object of special scrutiny.

In this "responsibilist" account, as in traditional accounts, I maintain that knowledge claimants must produce good reasons for what they claim to know or understand. Questions about evidence, justification, and validity are persistent epistemological questions; but my approach carries the indispensable caveat that these questions are valid only when they are framed so that they do not constrain replies to those that offer definitive, conclusive evidence or to those that provide final justification. Standard justification procedures, and the questions to which they purportedly respond, retain an important place within this view of cognition, yet they deal with only a small part of a complex situation out of which beliefs and knowledge claims arise and are challenged. Their explanatory capacity is quite limited. Although we do not lack evidence that we know and understand something of the world, or at least that we can derive reliable knowledge from our experience of it, we are a very long way from knowing what it is to know, from understanding what it is to understand, even after centuries of concentration upon such questions.

In the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics,* Wittgenstein observes, "Not empiricism and yet realism in philosophy, that is

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the hardest thing."[6] The observation captures a fundamental aim of this book. By endorsing certain aspects of foundational epistemology, yet not the foundationalist project as such, I have indicated the need to maintain what I call an empirico-realist orientation in knowledge-seeking endeavors. The need to maintain such an orientation is experienced by would-be knowers as a kind of pressure upon them as cognitive agents. This pressure might well not be felt by those empiricists who believe that the world imprints itself willy-nilly upon our cognitive apparatus so that the primary cognitive task is simply to sort and shuffle what is given. It is a pressure one might hope to evade could one appeal, in a foundational way, to sources of epistemic authority and/or to privileged epistemic propositions that could guarantee the validity of cognitive assertions. Having assumed the absence of such authority, either immanent or transcendent, one is faced, it seems, either with allowing that "anything goes" or with insisting that "reality," however it is construed, must constrain cognitive activity, that one must, perhaps paradoxically, cultivate an openness to that constraint, although such an attitude is indeed hard to achieve. I am arguing (as Wittgenstein, too, maintains) that the latter alternative is the preferred one. Its achievement seems, in fact, to require a well-developed epistemic character, and just what that might involve is the subject of this discussion.

The project, then, is to develop a perspective in theory of knowledge that is neither analogous in structure nor in functional capacity to foundationalist and coherentist theories, but that sees a different set of questions as central to epistemological enquiry. The differences I shall elaborate are, admittedly, matters of degree and emphasis, but they are real differences none the less. By shifting the emphasis of enquiry in the ways I shall propose, it may be possible to recapture some of the wonder in which philosophy is said to have begun. The fact that we human

[6]Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics,* edited by G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), vi § 23. I have benefited from Sabina Lovibond's reflections on this observation in *Realism and Imagination in Ethics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 45 ff.

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beings do, indeed, achieve knowledge and understanding of the world in which, for no apparent reason, we find ourselves should, in view of its very unlikelihood, elicit amazement, wonder, and respect. Indeed, I believe it is vital to the fruitful continuation of any kind of epistemological project that this attitude of wonder be sustained as long as it inspires constructive reflection rather than mute amazement.

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