



# Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgment

By Michael A Bishop, J. D. Trout

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Bishop and Trout here present a unique and provocative new approach to epistemology (the theory of human knowledge and reasoning). Their approach aims to liberate epistemology from the scholastic debates of standard analytic epistemology, and treat it as a branch of the philosophy of science. The approach is novel in its use of cost-benefit analysis to guide people facing real reasoning problems and in its framework for resolving normative disputes in psychology. Based on empirical data, Bishop and Trout show how people can improve their reasoning by relying on Statistical Prediction Rules (SPRs). They then develop and articulate the positive core of the book. Their view, Strategic Reliabilism, claims that epistemic excellence consists in the efficient allocation of cognitive resources to reliable reasoning strategies, applied to significant problems. The last third of the book develops the implications of this view for standard analytic epistemology; for resolving normative disputes in psychology; and for offering practical, concrete advice on how this theory can improve real people's reasoning.

This is a truly distinctive and controversial work that spans many disciplines and will speak to an unusually diverse group, including people in epistemology, philosophy of science, decision theory, cognitive and clinical psychology, and ethics and public policy.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"I recommend this book to those interested in connections between psychology and epistemology...it is informative and written in a lively style. I certainly agree with the authors' contention that courses in critical thinking should pay more attention to the types of studies and reasoning patterns that they summarize and analyze."--*Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*

"This book is a very well-written (and funny) excursion into genuinely naturalized epistemology with important practical consequences."--*CHOICE*

"Bishop and Trout have written a wonderful book. Their goal is nothing less than a radical reorientation of contemporary epistemology. Rejecting the analytic enterprise of explicating our concepts of justification and knowledge, they instead seek a return to an epistemology which would provide rules for the direction of the mind. Empirically informed and philosophically sophisticated, this is a lively and challenging book."--Hilary Kornblith, Professor of Philosophy, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

"This book should be read by anyone interested in the foibles and fallibility of human reasoning, and in how an empirically informed view of human knowledge and understanding may help yield not only good philosophy, but also improved policy, better thinking and greater well being."--Eldar Shafir, Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs, Princeton University

"This is a brilliant and useful essay integrating theoretical philosophy and empirical psychology to the benefit of both disciplines. It is a paradigm example of how a philosophical perspective can bring order and new insights into scientific practice. And perhaps best of all, it was fun to read."--Reid Hastie, Professor of Behavioral Science, University of Chicago

"One of the surprising critiques Bishop and Trout offer of analytic epistemology is that it is not normative enough. They argue that their thoroughly naturalistic approach to epistemology does significantly better on this score. All of this material is fresh, original and exciting. It might even be right! It is a safe bet that Bishop and Trout will be recognized as two of the most interesting and innovative people working in the area where philosophy of science, epistemology and empirical psychology come together." --Stephen Stich, Board of Governors Professor of Philosophy, Rutgers University

## About the Author

**Michael Bishop** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Northern Illinois University. His work has appeared in journals such as *Philosophy of Science*, *Noûs*, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *Philosophical Studies*, and *Synthese*.

**J. D. Trout** is Professor of Philosophy and Adjunct Professor at the Parmlly Hearing Institute, Loyola University Chicago. He has authored an award-winning book, *Measuring the Intentional World* (Oxford 1998), and has co-authored or co-edited three other books. His work has appeared in journals such as *Philosophy of Science*, *Noûs*, *Psychological Review*, and *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

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### Laying Our Cards on the Table

It is time for epistemology to take its rightful place alongside ethics as a discipline that offers practical, real-world recommendations for living. In our society, the powerful are at least sometimes asked to provide a moral justification for their actions. And there is at least sometimes a heavy price to be paid when a person, particularly an elected official, is caught engaging in immoral actions or defending clearly immoral policies. But our society hands out few sanctions to those who promote and defend policies supported by appallingly weak reasoning. Too often, condemnation is meted out only after the policies have been implemented and have led to horrible results: irresponsible war and spilt blood or the needless ruin of people's prospects and opportunities. Epistemology is a serious business for at least two reasons. First, epistemology guides reasoning, and we reason about everything. If one embraces a defective morality, one's ability to act ethically is compromised. But if one embraces a defective epistemology, one's ability to act effectively in all areas of life is compromised. Second, people don't fully appreciate the risks and dangers of poor reasoning. Everyone knows the danger of intentional evil; but few fully appreciate the real risks and untold damage wrought by apparently upstanding folk who embrace and act on bad epistemological principles. Such people don't look dangerous. But they are. An example of the costs of upstanding people reasoning poorly is the surprisingly strong opposition in the United States to policies that would provide opportunities and services to the disadvantaged (e.g., in terms of education and basic needs such as health care). Much of this opposition is not based on the rejection of a moral principle of equal opportunity, but instead on poorly-arrived-at empirical views. Some people reject redistributive social policies on the grounds that they are inevitably ineffective; others rely on clearly mistaken views about what percentage of the federal budget actually goes to pay for such programs. That's not to say that there aren't good arguments against some redistributive policies. Some can backfire, and others (particularly those that benefit the non-poor) can be very expensive. But sound comparative policy analysis provides no support to a principled opposition to redistributive social policies. People who defend appalling social policies often do so on the basis of weak reasoning about factual matters rather than on the basis of backward moral precepts.

One might think that our call for a more prescriptive, reason-guiding epistemology is more appropriate for the areas of "critical thinking" or "informal logic" (Feldman 1999, 184—85, n10). The problem with this suggestion is that these areas, as exemplified in textbooks, are completely divorced from contemporary epistemology. This bespeaks deep problems both for critical thinking courses and for contemporary epistemology. Epistemology, if it is to achieve its normative potential, must make firm contact with the sorts of reasoning errors that lead to horrendous and avoidable outcomes. And critical thinking courses must be informed by a theory about what makes reasoning good or bad. We do not have in mind a thin epistemological "theory" (e.g., "premises should be true and support the conclusion") that yields a long list of informal fallacies. Rather, an effective critical thinking course should be informed by a theory that (among other things) helps us to recognize, anticipate, and compensate for our cognitive frailties. In other words, such courses should be informed by a deeply naturalistic epistemological theory.

We have written this book driven by a vision of what epistemology could be—normatively reason guiding and genuinely capable of benefiting the world. If our tone is not always dispassionate, it is because our profession has so clearly failed to bring the potential benefits of epistemology to ordinary people’s lives. We are under no illusions, however. This book is, at best, a modest first step toward the construction of an epistemological theory with concrete, prescriptive bite. And even if our theory should be somewhere close to the truth, we are not sanguine about the potential of philosophy to influence the world. Sometimes, though, life rewards wild-eyed optimists. If in our case it doesn’t, we fall squarely within what is best in our philosophical tradition if our reach should exceed our grasp.

1. Starting points: What epistemology is about Theories, including epistemological theories, are supposed to be about something. They are supposed to explain or account for some range of phenomena. An important way in which our approach to epistemology differs from that of most contemporary English-speaking epistemologists is in terms of what we take to be the proper subject matter of epistemology— what we take to be the phenomena or evidence that an epistemological theory is supposed to account for or explain. Traditional epistemological theories aim to provide a theory that captures our considered epistemic judgments, in particular, our considered judgments about knowledge and justification. Our epistemological theory aims to uncover the normative assumptions of a branch of science. We disagree with most traditional epistemologists in terms of what epistemology is about. This difference couldn’t be more fundamental.

#### 1.1. The starting point of the standard analytic approach to epistemology

Standard Analytic Epistemology (SAE) names a contingently clustered class of methods and theses that have dominated English-speaking epistemology for much of the past century. Almost all the contemporary readings in the most popular epistemology textbooks are prime examples of SAE. Contemporary versions of foundationalism, coherentism, and reliabilism are exemplars of SAE. While we object to the methods of SAE, and therefore to the kinds of theories it leads to, our main goal in this chapter is to distinguish our approach from that of SAE. So let’s begin with the starting points of SAE—what proponents of SAE take to be the fundamental phenomena or evidence of epistemology.

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