Philosophers have long inquired into the nature and even the possibility of human knowledge. This book identifies two mistaken assumptions that have fundamentally shaped that tradition of philosophical thought. Correcting those assumptions results in a unique theory of knowledge — one that conceives of it in a rigorous yet non-absolutist way. This theory offers new solutions to many venerable philosophical puzzles.

I THINK
Anna Wierzbicka
in English: Meaning and Culture

One of the most striking features of English from a cross-cultural perspective is the proliferation of various linguistic tools for qualifying one's statements, hedging one's assertions, and differentiating the strength of one's assent to a proposition. This applies in particular to epistemic verbal phrases like I suppose, I gather, I imagine, I presume, and so on. This chapter traces the rise of such epistemic qualifiers in the history of English, linking it, in particular, with the enormous influence of Locke's ideas concerning degrees of probability, degrees of assent, the limitations of human knowledge, and the need to always distinguish between knowledge and judgment. The chapter undertakes a fine-grained semantic analysis of a large number of expressions like I suppose, I gather, I presume, I assume, I bet, I guess, and so on, and discusses their cultural underpinnings, in a cross-cultural and historical perspective.
English has a much larger repertoire of epistemic (sentential) adverbs than other European languages, possibly indeed without parallel in other languages of the world. The set of these adverbs includes the following: probably, possibly, clearly, obviously, presumably, evidently, apparently, supposedly, conceivably, undoubtedly, allegedly, reportedly, arguably, unquestionably, seemingly, certainly, and in American English likely. As this chapter discusses in some detail, this rich repertoire of epistemic adverbs developed in English gradually. Undoubtedly, the rise of this semantico-grammatical category in English was related to the rise of verbal epistemic phrases, such as I presume, I assume, I gather, I understand, I suppose, and so on. The cultural concerns reflected in the two categories are essentially the same, and in both cases they can be linked with the post-Lockean emphasis on the limitations of human knowledge, on the need to distinguish knowledge from judgment, on differentiating between different “degrees of assent.” But to compare the class of “epistemic adverbs” in different languages one must first identify this class in each language, and for this one needs some explicit semantic criteria. In the absence of a detailed semantic analysis of the individual words it is impossible to rigorously delimit the class in question; and without delimiting it, it is impossible to compare its size across language boundaries. This chapter shows that the use of the NSM methodology makes it possible to carry out such detailed semantic analysis, and to establish that the proliferation of epistemic adverbs is indeed a distinctive feature of English. The legal scholar Larry Solan (1999) has observed that British “17th century thinkers, influenced heavily by John Locke, developed an epistemology that differentiated among various kinds of evidence.” It is shown that in the English-speaking world, this epistemology differentiating among various kinds and degrees of certainty has had an impact on ordinary ways of speaking, and on the English language itself, and this impact continues to this day.
This chapter talks about how the difference between divine and human knowledge became quantitative rather than qualitative. God may possess infinite knowledge, humans have finite; God knows all at once intuitively, humans’ thinking processes are discursive. Yet what humans know, they know exactly as God knows it—it is, in fact, the same act of knowledge by which humans and God know something. By knowing itself, the divine intellect knows ipso facto everything other than itself; its knowledge is the simple unity of the “knower and the known.” The chapter describes how knowledge by doing, that which is named factual or ergetic knowledge, pertains to the domain of actual beings and their interaction.

Human Knowledge and Reflection
Hilary Kornblith
in Knowledge and its Place in Nature

Some have argued that knowledge, or human knowledge, requires some sort of reflection, usually on the reasonableness of one’s beliefs. It is argued that there is no such requirement, either for knowledge in general, or even for human knowledge. Reflection is not always an epistemically good thing; when it is epistemically valuable, what is valuable about it is already explained by a reliability requirement on knowledge. Knowledge does not require reflection of any sort.

Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgment
Michael A Bishop and J. D. Trout
in Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgment
This book presents a new approach to epistemology (the theory of human knowledge and reasoning). Its 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, the book shows how people can improve their reasoning by relying on Statistical Prediction Rules (SPRs). It then develops and articulates the positive core of the book. The view presented — 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.

Natural Evil and the Possibility of Knowledge
Richard Swinburne

in Providence and the Problem of Evil
Published in print: 1998 Published Online: November 2003
Item type: chapter

The opportunity to study natural processes that produce good and bad effects gives humans the opportunity to acquire knowledge of how to produce good and bad effects themselves, and thus to make the efficacious choices, which the 'free will defence' sees as such a good thing. If God gave us this knowledge in some other way, this would give us too evident an awareness of his presence.

Direct Awareness and God's Experience of a Temporal Now
Gregory E. Ganssle

in God and Time: Essays on the Divine Nature
Published in print: 2001 Published Online: October 2011
Item type: chapter

This chapter explores the implications of William Alston's claim that God knows what he knows without having any beliefs. Most discussions of God's knowledge assume that we ought to understand God's knowledge
as being something like a propositional attitude, just as we understand human knowledge. Alston has challenged this construal of divine knowledge. God knows what he knows, Alston claims, in virtue of his direct awareness of facts. He does not have propositional attitudes at all. It is argued that if God knows what he knows by direct awareness, then God must be atemporal. If God is temporal, he cannot have absolute immediate awareness of past or future facts. Absolute immediate awareness cannot span time. A knowing subject who is temporal can have direct intuitive awareness only of those facts that are temporally present.

Three Views of Human Knowledge
Ernest Sosa

This chapter considers a traditional account of knowledge along with its indirect realist view of perception. On a traditional approach, perceptual knowledge is a special case of “justified true belief plus.” Such justification is alleged to come from the evidence of our senses. The chapter also compares a radically opposed, knowledge-first account, one that claims an important advantage: it is said to make room for reasons that can establish answers to our questions, enabling us to vouch for those answers. There is, however, a further alternative to consider. While better aligned with the tradition, this further alternative, as the chapter describes, still claims the same advantage as the radical knowledge-first approach.

Neoconstructivism
Scott Johnson

Arguments over the developmental origins of human knowledge are ancient, founded in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, and Kant. They have also persisted long enough to become a core area of inquiry in cognitive and developmental science. Empirical contributions to these debates, however, appeared only in the last century, when Jean Piaget offered the first viable theory of knowledge acquisition that
centered on the great themes discussed by Kant: object, space, time, and causality. The essence of Piaget's theory is constructivism: the building of concepts from simpler perceptual and cognitive precursors. In particular, from experience gained through manual behaviors and observation. The constructivist view was disputed by a generation of researchers dedicated to the idea of the “competent infant,” endowed with knowledge (say, of permanent objects) that emerged prior to facile manual behaviors. Taking this possibility further, it has been proposed that many fundamental cognitive mechanisms—reasoning, event prediction, decision-making, hypothesis testing, and deduction—operate independently of all experience and are, in this sense, innate. The competent-infant view has an intuitive appeal, attested to by its widespread popularity, and it enjoys a kind of parsimony: it avoids the supposed philosophical pitfall posed by having to account for novel forms of knowledge in inductive learners. But this view leaves unaddressed a vital challenge: to understand the mechanisms by which new knowledge arises. This challenge has now been met. The neoconstructivist approach is rooted in Piaget's constructivist emphasis on developmental mechanisms.

The Priority of the Perfect in the Philosophical Theology of the Continental Rationalists
ROBERT MERRIHEW ADAMS

in Rationalism, Platonism and God: A Symposium on Early Modern Philosophy
Published in print: 2007 Published Online: January 2012
Item type: chapter

This chapter examines the concept of the priority of the perfect in continental rationalists’ philosophical theology. It suggests that the less perfect or complete needs to be understood in terms of what is more perfect and complete and this is called the top-down strategy. It argues that divine knowledge constitutes a kind of perfect ideal or archetype which human knowledge imperfectly resembles or approaches and contends that man’s knowledge and thought could be to God’s rather as a dog’s is to man’s.
Perception and Language
E. Brian Davies

in Science in the Looking Glass: What Do Scientists Really Know?
Published in print: 2007 Published Online: September 2008
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Item type: chapter

This chapter examines the evidence that almost everything relating to human knowledge is more problematical that we normally admit. It starts with a review of recent work in experimental psychology, because it is surely necessary to understand our physical nature if we are to understand the nature of our thoughts. The first half of the chapter describes the wide variety of methods which have been used to investigate the differences between what we think we see and reality itself. The second half discusses the relationship between language and reality.

Believing Animals
Christian Smith

in Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture
Published in print: 2003 Published Online: October 2011
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Item type: chapter

This chapter tries to explain that all human persons, no matter how well educated, how scientific, how knowledgeable, are, at bottom, believers. We are all necessarily trusting, believing animals, creatures who must and do place our faith in beliefs that cannot themselves be verified except by means established by the presumed beliefs themselves. Western thinkers have tried to identify a universal and certain foundation for human knowledge. Various movements within the 18th- and 19th-century “Enlightenment” in particular sought to specify an authoritative foundation of knowledge not based on the revelation, faith, and tradition of Christianity. This chapter seeks to identify a strong foundation for knowledge that would be secular, universal, and indubitable. One way to understand philosophical epistemology since Descartes is as a story of repeated unsuccessful attempts to identify this kind of foundation of human knowledge. As a consequence, there has emerged in recent decades a tendency that views this epistemological project itself as fatally flawed.
This chapter discusses the two varieties of human knowledge: the animal and the reflective. Animal knowledge does not require that the knower have an epistemic perspective on his belief, a perspective from which he endorses the source of that belief, from which he can see that source as reliably truth conducive. Reflective knowledge does by contrast require such a perspective.

What, if anything, is the bearing of flux, or impermanence, as found in this world on the case for the Jewish-Christian God? This chapter argues that the bearing is positive rather than negative, given the redemptive character and aims of this mysterious God. It proposes that a distinctive agape struggle involving humans and God is an elusive indicator of permanence in connection with this God. Philosophers of religion typically have neglected this important lesson, often as a result of looking for permanence in the wrong places. It identifies the upshot of this lesson for human knowledge of God. The chapter offers a rather broad vision of such knowledge on the basis of plausibility considerations that would receive more elaboration and analysis in a larger project. Such a vision opens up some new prospects in the philosophy of religion.

Intuitions about Knowledge
Richard Foley

in When Is True Belief Knowledge?
This chapter considers the intuitions elicited from knowledge stories. It remarks that intuitions can be useful but only as starting points, not rigid constraints. The chapter thus provides a framework that can be used to explain how and why intuitions arise. More importantly, this framework can be used to engage the various philosophical questions and puzzles that arise about knowledge, from why knowledge is valuable and what its relationship is with justified belief to whether it can be acquired by luck and why it is we are so often willing to admit that something we believe to be true is nonetheless not something we know.

The Analytic of Concepts
J. N. Findlay

in Kant and the Transcendental Object: A Hermeneutic Study
Published in print: 1981 Published Online: October 2011
doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198246381.003.0004
Item type: chapter

This chapter discusses the following: (i) Complementarity of thought and intuition in human knowledge, relation of concepts to rules and the judgements and inferences. The judgement given too central a place in Kantian theory: other conceptual structures, e.g., the set, are ignored; (ii) A priori concepts, judgements, and ideas; (iii) Brief examination of the metaphysical Deduction of the Categories; (iv) Kant's Transcendental Deductions are most illuminating to read in conjunction with the Analytic of Principles; (v) Examination of the First Edition Deduction. The three empirical syntheses and their transcendental prototypes. Puzzling abandonment of the Transcendental Object as underlying necessary syntheses, and concentration on the equally obscure Transcendental Subject; (vi) The Transcendental Deduction of the Second Edition is a vastly confused document involving most of the logical faults of the First Edition Deduction, without its illuminating excursions into transcendental psychology.

Apollinaris Redux? Augustine and the Psychology of Christ
Dominic Keech

in The Anti-Pelagian Christology of Augustine of Hippo, 396-430
Published in print: 2012 Published Online: January 2013
doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199662234.003.0006
Item type: chapter
Chapter 5 examines Julian of Eclanum’s accusation that Augustine’s definition of inherited sin must deny his Christ a fully human soul. First surveying Augustine’s understanding of Apollinarianism, it then finds his broader conception of human will and knowledge problematic, where it repeats Origen’s confusion between fully intentional acts and the first stirrings of sinful desire; and where his conception of concupiscence pushes these stirrings into the bodily realm, of the autonomy of the genitals and ecstasy of orgasm. This results in an uneven Christology: Augustine characterizes Christ as a human with a perfect divine will, omniscient throughout his earthly life; yet he also suggests that Christ exercises a distinctively human will that requires salvation, and is similar to the will of sinful humanity in the life of grace. Julian’s claim is found to have some weight, leading to the question of the origin of Christ’s soul in Augustine’s thought.

The Finite Planet
Frank H. T. Rhodes
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Publisher: Cornell University Press
Item type: chapter

This chapter examines the Earth's finitude of space and resources, noting that land areas cannot so much be changed or expanded upon as it can be reused or replaced. Although there are the possibilities of colonizing other areas of the solar system, the chapter focuses largely on the planet Earth and its own finite resources. It emphasizes the need for restraint and resourcefulness on a planet with rather daunting limits, especially in the face of the ever-growing human population. Moreover, given their population and their penchant for consumption, the human species has invariably created most of the problems that plague the Earth today. Responsible tenancy on Earth thus becomes a challenge, though not an impossible one—human knowledge is, unlike the Earth's resources, unlimited in scope.

The Two Humes
Walter Ott
in Causation and Laws of Nature in Early Modern Philosophy
Published in print: 2009 Published Online: September 2009
Publisher: Oxford University Press
Item type: chapter
Hume's Treatise has two distinct goals: first, to reveal the limitations of human knowledge by developing an empirical psychology, and second, to decide metaphysical questions. Many commentators take these to be in conflict, and so emphasize one or the other. This chapter suggests a way to unify them: by discovering the limits of human thought, Hume can declare certain metaphysical positions not just unknowable, or true for all we can tell, but positively nonsensical. The psychological project is thus in service of the metaphysical.