

**Excerpts from Chapter 1 of *Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgment*
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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 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...

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, 184-5, 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 the 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.