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WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT THE CONCEPT OF KNOWLEDGE?

ABSTRACT

Can we learn something interesting about knowledge by examining our concept of knowledge? Quite a bit, many argue. My own view, however, is that the concept of knowledge is of little epistemological interest. In this paper, I critically examine one particularly interesting defense of the view that the concept of knowledge is of great epistemological interest: Edward Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. A minimalist view about the value of examining our concept of knowledge is defended.

It is, I believe, a significant fact about human beings that we have a concept of knowledge, and the fact that we do have such a concept allows us to do a great many things that we otherwise could not do, or, at least, could only do with great difficulty. There are many, however, who have defended some extremely ambitious claims about the importance of having a concept of knowledge. Some, for example, have claimed that it is impossible to have knowledge if one does not have the concept of knowledge.[1] Many have claimed that by examining our concept of knowledge, we may come to understand what knowledge is.[2] Still others have claimed that what it is to be an item of knowledge is a matter of the social roles that knowledge plays, and these connections to social roles are written into the very concept of knowledge.[3] Each of these claims would make the concept of knowledge far more important than I believe it to be, and would make an examination of the concept of knowledge far more illuminating than I believe it is. I thus wish to explore a minimalist view about the importance of our concept of knowledge, one that does not deny what I take to be an obvious truth, that having such a concept plays an important role in our intellectual lives, and yet, at the same time, does not commit us to any of these ambitious and controversial claims.

Episteme 8.1 (2011): 38–52
DOI: 10.3366/epi.2011.0005
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www.eupjournals.com/epi

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2011.0005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Why Should We Care About the Concept of Knowledge?

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I want to begin, not by asking questions about the concept of knowledge, but instead, by asking some questions about the concept of water. We all possess such a concept, and possessing such a concept allows us to do things that we otherwise could not do, or, perhaps, it allows us to do things more easily than we otherwise could. What is so important about having such a concept? What does having a concept of water do for us that we could not do, or could not do as easily, if we did not have it? And just how is it that our concept of water can do this work for us?

First, a word about concepts. I take concepts to be a species of mental representation. Mental representations are, first and foremost, located in the minds of individuals. So when we speak of "the" concept of water, for example, we may have in mind some particular individual's concept of water, or since, at least in this particular case, most people have quite similar concepts of water, we may have in mind something like the features which are widely shared among the many numerically different concepts of water. When there is relatively little difference across individuals in this way, talk of "the" concept of water, or the folk concept of water, may be a fine exegetical convenience, and it is one I shall adopt here. On the other hand, when there are large differences across individuals – that is, when, for some x, different individuals have dramatically different concepts of x – talk of "the" concept of x, or the folk concept of x, can be quite misleading. In such cases, it is thus important to make explicit just whose concept of x one is talking about. Thus, when it matters, I will make explicit just whose concept it is that I am talking about.

Of course, a hot debate centers around just what kind of mental representation a concept is. I will try not to make any controversial assumptions about this. I may make some assumptions about the nature of concepts when discussing particular examples, just because remaining entirely neutral on these issues can make exegesis unduly complicated. But none of these assumptions, I believe, will make a difference for the arguments I make; the arguments can all, I believe, be translated into one's preferred idiom, whatever that may be.

What then is so important about having a concept of water? Water is, of course, all around us, and all of us drink it and interact with it in many different ways. We see it in rivers, and streams, and oceans; it comes out of the sky in the form of rain; it has countless different practical uses in our daily lives. It is thus no surprise that we have a single word for water, and that water is lexicalized in a very wide range of languages. Water plays such an important role in our daily lives that we need to be able to talk about it, and having a single word for it allows us to do that in a particularly economical way. Having a concept of water allows us to think about water as such, to use Jerry Fodor's apt phrase (1998, 3). If we couldn't think about water as such, then we could not have introduced a term referring to it. So having a concept of water is a prerequisite for having a word for water. I take all of this to be quite uncontroversial.

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Having the concept of water is, as a matter of fact, typically accompanied by an ability to recognize water, and most people know a great deal about water. But while this is true of the concept of water, it is not true generally. I have the concept of a transistor, but I'm quite sure that I could not distinguish a transistor from many other electronic components, or, for that matter, from many colored pieces of plastic attached to a wire. And although I have a great many beliefs about transistors, it has been a very long time since I made a study of them, and I suspect that many of my beliefs about transistors are hopelessly out of date or simply in error. But none of this prevents me from using the word 'transistor' to refer to transistors. There is a division of linguistic labor, as Putnam pointed out (1975). I don't need to know what transistors are, or be able to pick them out, in order to be able to refer to them. And this means that I don't need to know what transistors are, or be able to pick them out, in order to have a concept of transistor either. I may simply defer to others in my linguistic community, others who are in a superior epistemic position with respect to transistors.[4]

Now as Putnam also pointed out (1975), even those members of my linguistic community who stand in an epistemically superior position to me with respect to transistors, and whose epistemic position makes it possible for the rest of us to refer to and think about transistors in spite of our ignorance and errors, even they may have many mistaken beliefs about transistors. Their theory of transistors may be so filled with errors that they cannot give a true description of transistors that uniquely picks them out.

This is not to say that these individuals, the experts with respect to transistors, need not have any special relationship to the things we are all referring to and thinking about. As I said earlier, these individuals are in a better epistemic position than the rest of us. They are not merely regarded as experts; they have some genuine expertise. To a first approximation, these individuals must have at least some (admittedly fallible) recognitional capacities that the rest of us lack, and they have a set of (fallible) procedures for gaining more information about transistors, procedures which, despite producing some mistaken beliefs about transistors along the way, are nevertheless reliably connected to the object of their study. As Richard Boyd has put it, these procedures must afford the investigators *epistemic access* to transistors, and it is the fact that they have such epistemic access which, though fallible, makes possible the having of a concept of transistor, and, in turn, a word that refers to them (1979).

The term 'water,' then, and the concept of water, is unusual in a number of respects. Although there is, to be sure, a body of specialized knowledge about water that is not widespread within the linguistic community that uses the word 'water' and that has a concept of water, nevertheless, because water is so ubiquitous, and because it is so easy to come to know a great many things about water, virtually everyone is in a fine position to pick out water when they see it and virtually everyone has a concept of water that, as far as it goes, accurately reflects many of the features that water has. The contrast with transistors, however, shows us

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that this is not a feature of word possession generally, or of concept possession generally. It is, instead, something characteristic of things, like water, that are utterly ubiquitous and easily known.

Having a concept of water, and having a word for water, provides an easy conduit for the flow of information about water. You may know where potable water is available when I do not; if we have a common word for water, then I can easily ask about water and you can easily provide me with information about it. The ability to use the word 'water' to refer to water allows each of us in the linguistic community to tap into the information about water that the community has generated, whether that involves isolated bits of local wisdom, or abstruse matters of scientific knowledge. Without a word for water, I am put at a distance from the accumulated wisdom of the community. Without a concept of water, I cannot even form beliefs about water qua water.

Consider now the more interesting case of the concept of health. Health, like water, is ubiquitous. Most people have a vast array of beliefs about health, many of which are true. But like transistors, the nature of health is not at all obvious. The views of the folk on health have changed dramatically over the last several hundred years, and, not unrelatedly, our theoretical understanding of what it is to be healthy has changed over time. Not so long ago, health was not at all well understood. With advances in the medical and biological sciences generally, we have a far better understanding of health than we did a few hundred years ago. Finally, the concept of health, unlike the concepts of water or of a transistor, seems to have a normative dimension.[5] To be healthy involves being in a certain sort of desirable state; if someone is unhealthy, there is something wrong with that person.

Just as with the case of water and transistors, merely having the use of the word 'health' allows one to tap into the community's accumulated understanding about health. This allows one to correct one's misunderstandings, and to relieve one's ignorance. Of course, this assumes that the community has an accurate set of views about what health is, and this is not always the case. Even in a community that is organized in ways that allow for the reliable discovery and dissemination of information, it is inevitable that misinformation will, at times, be transmitted. But there can be little doubt that the ability to tap into what others believe is, in a very wide range of cases, a reliable source of information. More than this, it would be in practice impossible to have accurate beliefs about the wide range of topics on which we do form beliefs without the benefits that language affords. Learning the use of the word affords one access to this information; one needn't already know what health is in order to use the word as a vehicle for gaining and improving one's understanding. In order to be in a position to use the word 'health' as a gateway to the community's pool of information, one must have the concept of health.

The picture of concepts I am offering here is utterly minimal. If one thinks of a concept as some sort of theory-like mental representation, then the content of the theory that constitutes one's concept need not be at all robust. One needn't know much about transistors in order to be able to refer to them and to think about

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them as such. If you are a competent language user, and you overhear me talking about transistors, you may pick up the use of the word from me and use it with the intention of referring to whatever it is that I referred to when I used the word. If you do this, you will succeed in referring to transistors, and you will, in taking on the use of the word with this intention, form a concept of transistors.[6] You thereby have a mental representation – a concept – of transistors. To my mind, it is a bit overblown to regard this as some sort of mini-theory about transistors. One may have elaborate beliefs about them (as a result, for example, of overhearing someone talk about them), or one may have little more than the use of the word. Even when one does have a set of beliefs about transistors that might reasonably be thought of as some sort of mini-theory, the mini-theory need not be true of transistors or even approximately true. One may thus acquire the concept when one is almost entirely ignorant of the features of the thing it is a concept of, or, alternatively, when one has utterly mistaken beliefs about that thing. Concept possession does not guarantee any substantial knowledge; it arguably does not guarantee any knowledge at all.

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Let me turn, then, to the concept of knowledge. To what extent is it important that we have a concept of knowledge, and how is it that having such a concept can do important intellectual work for us?

Like water, knowledge is ubiquitous. It is, in addition, like health, a valuable thing. It is thus no surprise that being able to think about knowledge, and being able to talk about it as well, is a useful thing. Our ability to think and talk about water and transistors and health is a useful thing because it allows us to tap into the community understanding of these things, thereby allowing us to gain access to a good deal of information that we either could not gain entirely on our own, or could only gain with great effort, ingenuity, and, in many cases, good luck. Our ability to tap into this body of information requires that we have concepts and language, but it does not require that our concepts have any special features: the minimal view of concepts sketched in the previous section is sufficient to allow our concepts and our words to serve as a conduit of information. Having a concept of knowledge, and a word for knowledge, will thus be a useful thing insofar as knowledge itself is a useful thing. And it seems rather clear that knowledge is not only widely valued, but that it is genuinely valuable.

In his *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, Edward Craig asks,

> Couldn't it just be that knowledge, like water, is important stuff, and that the purpose of the concept is simply to enable us to think and talk about it? (1990, 3)

Craig, famously, rejects this minimalist view. It is precisely such a view, however, that I wish to defend. So it will be worth asking why it is that Craig and many others wish to endorse a more generous account, not only of the purpose of the concept of knowledge, but of the features of the concept itself.

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Craig is interested in providing an account of our concept of knowledge, and he proposes to develop such an account in what he acknowledges is a non-standard way. Rather than the usual technique favored by the advocates of conceptual analysis – testing proposed analyses against our intuitions about hypothetical cases – Craig suggests that we should look at

> what the concept of knowledge does for us, what its role in our life might be, and then ask what a concept having that role would be like, what conditions would govern its application. (2)

Craig favors such an approach because he notes that

> There seems to be no known language in which sentences using the word 'know' do not find a comfortable and colloquial equivalent. The implication is that it answers to some very general needs of human life, and it would surely be interesting to know which and how. (2)

Craig's answer, very roughly, is that any human society has a need to identify reliable informants, and what the concept of knowledge does is precisely to answer to this need: "the concept of knowledge is used to flag approved sources of information" (11). We may come to understand the content of the concept of knowledge, on Craig's view, by seeing what it is used for. In this manner, we may come to a deeper understanding not only of the concept of knowledge, but also of what knowledge is.

Now imagine someone saying something quite similar about water and the concept of water:

> There seems to be no language in which sentences involving the word 'water' do not find a comfortable and colloquial equivalent. The implication is that it answers to some very general needs of human life, and it would surely be interesting to know which and how. We may investigate what role the concept of water plays in human life, and, by understanding this, we may come to understand, not only the concept of water, but also what water is.

Now no one, of course, would say this, but it is worth asking why this should be so, and in what ways knowledge is supposed to be different. Craig has a brief reply.

> Knowledge is not a given phenomenon, but something that we delineate by operating with a concept which we create in answer to certain needs, or in pursuit of certain ideals. The concept of water, on the other hand, is determined by the nature of water itself and our experience of it. (3)

Each of the contrasts that Craig draws here – that knowledge, unlike water, "is not a given phenomenon"; that knowledge, unlike water, is "a concept which we create in answer to certain needs"; and that the concept of water is "determined by the nature of water itself," while, presumably, the concept of knowledge is not

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determined by knowledge itself – stands in need of explanation and defense. But Craig does not elaborate. Instead, he suggests that the best way to proceed is to see what results from his approach, and to determine whether it is illuminating. This is certainly worth doing, but I would like, nevertheless, to see whether these contrasts that Craig suggests between knowledge and water, and between the concept of knowledge and the concept of water, can be made sense of in a way that serves to motivate and defend Craig's approach.

Let us start with the first of the alleged contrasts: "knowledge is not a given phenomenon." Craig is not the only one to say this sort of thing. Thus, Michael Williams remarks that "Knowledge is not a natural phenomenon" (2004, 194). And John Haugeland argues that the capacity for knowledge is "not just a biological or 'natural' capacity"; it is, instead, "part of a cultural heritage" (1998, 2). These authors seem to have something quite similar in mind. Just what is it?

I think Craig's idea here, and certainly the idea that Williams and Haugeland have, is that knowledge, unlike water, is not a natural kind. This is certainly an idea that many find not only attractive, but obvious. It is, however, worth probing a bit.

Water is a natural kind. What makes water the kind of thing it is, as many see it, is a feature of the world itself, not a product of human ways of thinking. There are objectively correct ways of dividing the world up into chemical kinds, and had we come up with a system of classification for chemistry that divided substances into groupings by way of their colors, for example, rather than their atomic and molecular structures, we would not have done something that was merely inconvenient; we would have been in error about the kinds of chemical things there are. Not all systems of classification are like this, of course. The classification of tables into coffee tables, dining room tables, computer tables, and so on is not an attempt to cut nature at its joints; it does not seek to codify antecedently existing categories in ways that, we hope, will correspond to the real categories in the world. Instead, these are categories that we impose on the world for our own convenience. And the thought here, when Craig says that "knowledge is not a given phenomenon," is that the category of knowledge is not an antecedently existing category in the world that we might hope to get right; it is, instead, a category that we impose on the world, like the classifications of different types of furniture. And Craig has an hypothesis about why we impose this category on the world: we devise this category in order to identify those individuals upon whom we might rely as a source of information.

Notice that the point here is not that water is not created by humans while knowledge, in some sense, is. The distinction between natural kinds and humanly created kinds does not track the distinction between *things* that are not created by humans and those which are. Water may, at times, be created by humans in the laboratory. And, indeed, there are many chemical elements – natural kinds one and all – that cannot exist without the benefit of human intervention.[7] By the same token, there are things that are not created by humans, such as pieces of driftwood, that may belong to categories – the category of found art – that quite clearly are not

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natural kinds. What is at issue here is whether the category owes its existence to the activity of human beings, not whether the members of the category are humanly created. So if one thinks of items of knowledge as somehow humanly created, this is neither here nor there when it comes to figuring out whether knowledge is a natural kind.

Now Craig is surely right in saying that knowledge plays an important social role. No one should deny that it does. Craig wishes to argue, however, that what makes knowledge the kind of thing it is is the social role it plays, and this, of course, is a far more controversial thesis. Consider, thus, the case of gold. Gold, like knowledge, plays an important social role, but what makes something gold is a matter of its chemical structure and not anything at all having to do with its relationship to human beings. Indeed, the reason why gold can play the social role it does is, in many cases, explained by features, such as its rarity, that it has quite independently of the social role it plays. Gold was a rare thing long before there were human beings on the face of the earth who could use it in a variety of social interactions.

I don't think that it is at all implausible to think that knowledge, like gold, plays an important social role, and yet its ability to play this social role is explained by deeper features that it has, features it has independently of the social role it plays. For Craig, the fact that knowledge "answers to some very general needs of human life and thought" suggests that we should see its most fundamental features as lying in the social role it plays in human life. But human beings are not the only creatures who know things, and insofar as non-human animals have no need to identify reliable sources of testimony, since they do not speak a language, we cannot locate the central feature of knowledge in these creatures in any such social role.

Why is it, after all, that we are tempted to speak of many non-human animals as possessing knowledge? In order to explain their behavior, we need to attribute beliefs to such creatures. A simple stimulus-response account of their behavior, which would obviate the need for representational states like belief, is not adequate to the complexity of much of the behavior we see in the animal world. So we need to attribute beliefs to non-human animals for the very same reasons that we need to attribute beliefs to human beings. More than this, non-human animals have beliefs about their environments that are non-accidentally true: they are, like many human beliefs, reliably produced. Elsewhere, I have argued that the category of reliably produced true belief plays an important explanatory role in cognitive ethology (Kornblith 2002). Reliable belief-producing processes are important to the science of ethology because there is an evolutionary explanation for their existence. True beliefs play a crucial role in the production of successful goal satisfying behavior, and there is evolutionary pressure to select for cognitive processes that are instrumental in producing behavior that satisfies biologically given needs. From the point of view of evolutionary biology, then, the category of reliable belief producing processes is a significant one, as is the category of true beliefs that are produced by such processes. It is not surprising that ethologists interested in the evolutionary explanation of behavior have a term for reliably produced true

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2011.0005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

belief: they call it knowledge. I have argued that this is not just a technical term within cognitive ethology. Rather, by looking at the ethology literature, we come to understand what knowledge is.

On this way of looking at things, knowledge is as much a natural kind as water. The category of knowledge plays a crucial explanatory role in scientific theorizing, and, just as with the case of water, this system of classification is not merely one that answers to human needs. It is, instead, a feature of the world that any adequate scientific theory would need to account for, whatever the needs of the creatures who developed the theory. If one failed to recognize that non-human creatures have knowledge, one would thereby fail to understand something important about the cognitive lives of these creatures.

The concept of reliably produced true belief does not play a special social role in non-human creatures. It certainly cannot play the social role in languageless creatures that it plays in human life. Human beings have the conceptual capacity to form beliefs about mental states. Although this is a subject of some controversy, there is a good deal of reason to think that such an ability may not be present outside the human species.[8] If this is right, then non-human animals lack beliefs about their beliefs. They lack the concept of mental states generally, and so they lack a concept of knowledge. And simply because they do not speak a language, they lack the need that human beings have to identify good informants. So when we think about the world of non-human animals, much as there are many different animals with elaborate social structures, they cannot have a social role corresponding to that of good informant in the human world. Since we are able to communicate by way of language and they are not, we have a need that they do not: a need to identify those who can serve as useful sources of information.

As Craig would have it, the concept of knowledge is invented, as it were, in order to address this human need. What I have been suggesting, however, is that there is a category of knowledge – a natural kind – that exists quite apart from any human needs or interests. If we wish to explain the cognitive lives of non-human animals, and human beings, of course, as well, we will need to advert to talk of knowledge. And once we understand what knowledge is, namely, reliably produced true belief, we can see why human beings who possess knowledge are well suited to play a certain social role. Those who know things are useful sources of information, and labeling them as such allows that information to be passed along in ways that answer to human concerns. The social role that knowledge plays is not what makes it the kind of thing it is. Rather, the kind of thing that knowledge is explains why it is well-suited to play the social role it does for human beings, a role it does not and cannot play for non-human knowers.

Let us turn to the second of the contrasts that Craig draws: that knowledge, unlike water, is "a concept which we create in answer to certain needs." Now, given the minimal view I have of concepts, I'm not at all sure that we should see any concept as one that we create. Concepts are produced in us by certain cognitive processes. Concept acquisition is something that happens to us, rather

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than something that we do. But let me not insist on this. Suppose one has a more generous conception of what our concepts amount to than the minimalist view allows. Suppose, as we did earlier, that concepts are mentally represented mini-theories. One might then see concepts as human creations insofar as theories are themselves human creations. And because theory construction is typically the product of many individuals rather than any single person acting alone, we might say, as many do, that the concept of knowledge is socially constructed.

This is fine as far as it goes, given the view of concepts as mentally represented mini-theories, but Craig suggests that in this respect the concept of knowledge differs from the concept of water. But just as the theory we have about knowledge is socially constructed, the theories we have about water are socially constructed as well. After all, the point we made about the social nature of theory construction is true whatever the content of the theory: the point was simply that the intellectual activity of theory construction is a social activity. So the contrast between the concept of knowledge and the concept of water seems to evaporate. Both of these concepts are socially constructed.

Craig does say a bit more about this. He says that knowledge, unlike water, is "something we delineate by operating with a concept that we create…." So perhaps the point here is not that the concept of knowledge is socially constructed – since virtually all concepts, on the view of concepts as mini-theories, are socially constructed – but that knowledge is "delineated" by means of our socially constructed concept, whereas water is not. But what does 'delineated' mean in this context? What Craig seems to have in mind here is that the boundaries of knowledge are determined by the concept that we construct, unlike the case of water, where, arguably, we try to construct a concept that accurately captures the character of the pre-existing phenomenon. But if this is what Craig has in mind, then this merely amounts to a restatement of the claim that knowledge, unlike water, is not a natural kind; it does not provide us with a reason to believe that knowledge is different from water in this respect.

Thus, if Craig is pointing out that the concept of knowledge is socially constructed, then he has failed to show that it differs in this respect from natural kind concepts. If, on the other hand, Craig is suggesting that which features make something a case of knowledge is itself socially constructed – that the category and not just the concept is socially constructed – then Craig is merely restating his claim that knowledge is not a natural kind rather than giving us a reason to believe it.

Craig doesn't just say that knowledge is "something that we delineate by operating with a concept which we create in answer to certain needs"; he says that it is "something that we delineate by operating with a concept which we create in answer to certain needs, or *in pursuit of certain ideals*" (emphasis added). This last phrase may be thought to be quite important. After all, knowledge is a normative term. To say that someone has knowledge is to say that such a person has met certain standards or attained certain ideals. But now the suggestion that knowledge is not a natural kind seems to follow directly from the fact that it

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embodies normative standards. Normative standards and ideals are not items in the world that we discover. A standard or ideal is a paradigm case of something that we project upon the world. But this is just to say that, insofar as knowledge is a normative category, it is not a natural kind.

A comparison with health is once again worth thinking about. Just as knowledge embodies normative standards, so too does the notion of health. And for this very reason, one might equally argue that, since health embodies normative standards, health cannot be a natural kind; it is, instead, a category that we project upon the world. More than this, a look at the history of the concept of health, and especially the history of the concept of mental health, might quickly convince one that the category was little more than a projection of society's tastes and prejudices.[9] (Remember that not very long ago, homosexuality was listed as a mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.)

We should not, however, be very quickly convinced by any such argument. While it is certainly true that all manner of fads and prejudices have influenced claims made over the years about health and mental health, this may show nothing more than the utterly banal point that people make mistakes, and often very bad mistakes, as a result of ignorance, fads, and prejudices. And while the notion of health does involve conformance to certain standards, we should not think that standards can only come from some sort of human projection. There is a well established tradition in evolutionary biology that portrays anatomical organs, for example, as selected for the functions that they play within the human body, and any such conception will bring with it a notion of proper functioning.[10] The standards for proper functioning are not a matter of meeting standards that we project on the world as a result of our tastes and parochial interests. They are, instead, standards that flow from the very nature of the function that the organ was selected to perform. As Darwin demonstrated long ago, the notion of selection does not require any kind of agent doing the selecting. A corollary of this Darwinian point is that standards of proper functioning do not require any kind of agent projecting a preferred set of standards. And what is true of proper functioning for organs is also true of the very nature of health.[11]

So too with knowledge. Our cognitive equipment is no less a product of evolution than our hearts, lungs, and kidneys. It was selected for, just as those anatomical organs were. Our cognitive equipment should thus be viewed as having a function, and with any such defensible claim about function comes a commitment to a notion of proper functioning, the idea that there are certain standards that must be met if the equipment is to fulfill its proper function. To repeat: these standards are not a projection of human parochial interests and concerns. They are, instead, objective features of the world. But this is just to say that the mere fact that talk of knowledge embodies certain standards provides us with no argument at all that knowledge is not a natural kind.[12]

Let me turn, briefly, to the last of the three contrasts that Craig mentions, that the concept of water, unlike the concept of knowledge, "is determined by the

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nature of water itself. . . ." I must confess that I'm a bit puzzled by this remark. If one regards concepts as mentally represented mini-theories, then the concept of water, and natural kind concepts generally, are certainly influenced by the kinds of which they are concepts, but, as was pointed out earlier, insofar as they embody our theories, they are just as socially constructed as the concepts we impose on the world. We may give an account of the history of concepts that are human impositions – the concepts of fashion, or furniture, or fox hunting – but we may also provide interesting and illuminating histories of natural kind concepts.[13] The question at issue here is not one about the social construction of concepts, nor is it a question about the social construction of items of knowledge. The question at issue is whether the category of knowledge itself is socially constructed. One cannot legitimately argue from the social construction of the concept of knowledge to the social construction of the category. By the same token, one should not argue from the fact that the category of water is not itself socially constructed to the claim that the concept of water is not socially constructed. Concepts may be socially constructed even when the categories they are concepts of are not.

Of course, if one endorses the minimal account of concepts that I advocate, the issue of the social construction of concepts does not even arise. Concepts are so insubstantial on this account that it is perfectly clear that they are not socially constructed. Our theories, of course, both about natural kinds and about other matters as well, are socially constructed. But the inference from the social construction of theories to the social construction of the things they are theories of should not even be tempting.

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Where does all of this leave our title question: Why should we care about our concept of knowledge? We have examined a number of different arguments that might take us from features of our concept of knowledge to features of knowledge itself, but all of them have been found wanting. Whether one has a minimal theory of concepts or a view that makes concepts more substantial, it is illegitimate to move directly from claims about our concept of knowledge to claims about knowledge itself. Now if there were some independent argument against the view of knowledge as a natural kind, one might draw on that in order to argue that the determinants of the category of knowledge could only come from our concept, and such an argument would then license a move from features of our concept to features of knowledge itself. It is important to recognize, however, that here the argumentative work would be done by the considerations lodged directly against the view of knowledge as a natural kind.

I have examined a number of arguments here of just that sort, and in every case, I have urged that the considerations offered do not give us reason to believe that the category of knowledge is socially constructed rather than a natural kind.[14]

https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2011.0005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

I can only conclude that for those who wish to understand the nature of knowledge, there may be no reason at all to care about our concept of knowledge.[15]

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https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2011.0005 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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NOTES

1 For example, Robert Brandom (1994, ch. 4; 2000, ch. 3), John McDowell (1996, Lecture VI), and Michael Williams (esp. 2004).

2 This is, indeed, a common feature of much of the philosophical literature on knowledge. For a particularly careful elaboration and defense of such a view, see (Goldman 2007).

3 For example, Kusch (2002).

4 Some have suggested that words for artifacts, such as 'transistor,' make special demands on those who would use them to refer, requiring, for example, that a speaker who uses such a term to refer must have in mind a description that uniquely picks out the referent of the term. See, for example, (Schwartz 1978) and (Thomasson 2007). I have responded to these suggestions in detail in (Kornblith 1980, 2007a).

5 For interesting discussion of this point, see, for example, (Boorse 1977) and (Bloomfield 2001).

6 I don't mean to be suggesting that being a language user is a prerequisite for having concepts. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that there are some concepts – the concept of a transistor is plausibly one such concept – that we could not have without possessing a language. More than this, it is clear that many of our concepts are acquired with the acquisition of bits of language.

7 Elements 106–118 were all synthesized in the laboratory rather than simply discovered in nature.

8 See, for example, (Povinelli and Eddy 1996), (Tomasello 1996), and (Cheney and Seyfarth 1990). I have discussed some of the relevant literature in (Kornblith 2002, sect. 2.5).

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9 Thomas Szasz, famously, made just such an argument in *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* (1961).

10 The importance of the notion of proper functioning, not only within biology, but also within the sciences of cognition, has long been a theme of Ruth Millikan's work (for example, Millikan 1984, 1993).

11 For a defense of this conception of health, see (Kitcher 1996).

12 I do not mean to be endorsing this particular account of epistemic normativity. Rather, such an account provides an illustration of how one might have a normative concept without having the normative standards flow from parochial human concerns. The point, then, is simply to illustrate the defect in the inference from the normativity of knowledge to the claim that knowledge is not a natural kind. There are other ways to explain epistemic normativity that could also be used to illustrate this point, but a discussion of these issues would take us too far afield from the concerns of this paper. For my own preferred explanation of the source of epistemic norms, see chapter five of *Knowledge and its Place in Nature*.

13 For one such illuminating history, see (Crosland 1962).

14 There are, of course, other arguments as well, but there simply is not space to consider them all here. For a sampling of such arguments, see (Goldman 2005), (Kusch 2005), (Talbott 2005), and (Williams 2004). I have responded to the first three of these authors in (Kornblith 2005), and to Williams in (Kornblith 2007b). Kusch offers additional considerations in (Kusch 2002, 165–8).

15 Thanks to the audience at Edinburgh for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and especially to Mikkel Gerken for extremely constructive and thought-provoking written comments.

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https://doi.org/10.3366/epi.2011.0005 Published online by Cambridge University Press