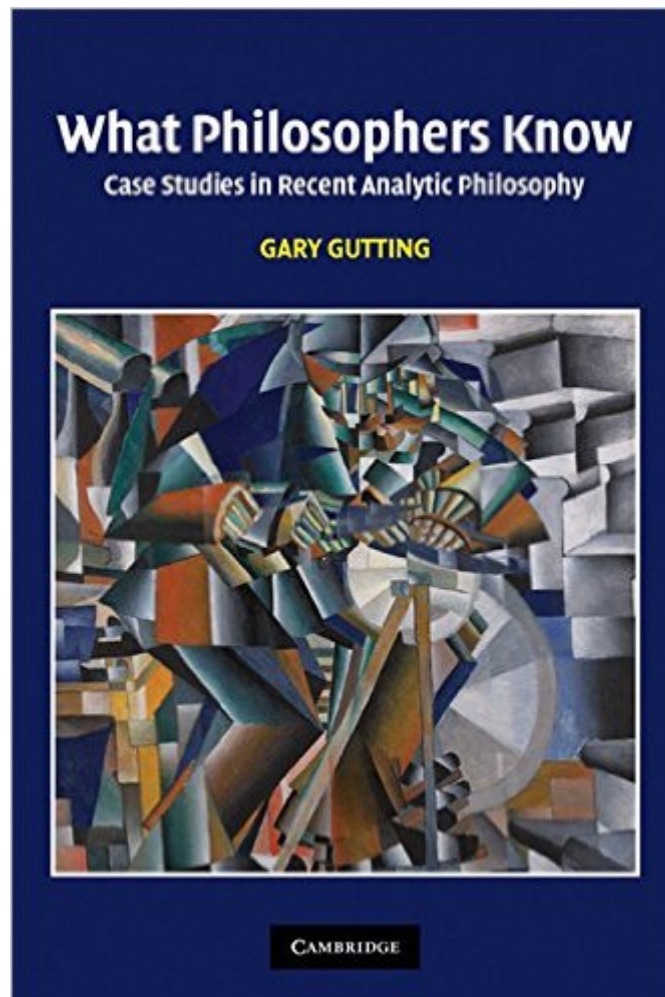


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What Philosophers Know: Case Studies In Recent Analytic Philosophy



Synopsis

Philosophy has never delivered on its promise to settle the great moral and religious questions of human existence, and even most philosophers conclude that it does not offer an established body of disciplinary knowledge. Gary Gutting challenges this view by examining detailed case studies of recent achievements by analytic philosophers such as Quine, Kripke, Gettier, Lewis, Chalmers, Plantinga, Kuhn, Rawls, and Rorty. He shows that these philosophers have indeed produced a substantial body of disciplinary knowledge, but he challenges many common views about what philosophers have achieved. Topics discussed include the role of argument in philosophy, naturalist and experimentalist challenges to the status of philosophical intuitions, the importance of pre-philosophical convictions, Rawls' method of reflective equilibrium, and Rorty's challenge to the idea of objective philosophical truth. The book offers a lucid survey of recent analytic work and presents a new understanding of philosophy as an important source of knowledge.

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Customer Reviews

Gary Gutting in "What Philosophers Know: Case Studies in Recent Analytic Philosophy", doesn't argue directly against the typical criticisms leveled at analytic philosophy (for example, that it seems an endless exercise in technical hair-splitting far removed from any important human concerns). But he does offer support for the intuition that deep and clear insights articulated by the best analytic philosophy have indeed produced something that can be considered disciplinary knowledge, and that this knowledge is under-appreciated outside, and also within, the ranks of philosophy. Gutting

proceeds via a case-history approach, passing through Quine, Kripke, Gettier, Plantinga, Chalmers, Kuhn, Rawls, Rorty, and others. A major pleasure of the book is the clarity with which he presents these selected highlights from the most recent half-century of Anglophone philosophy. His project is to show that despite the lack of compelling knockout arguments for any of the specific positions advanced by these thinkers, we can still appreciate the progress and accumulation of knowledge they achieved, if only we look from the right perspective. The wrong perspective is what Gutting terms "philosophical foundationalism", which he defines as being willing to accept as philosophical knowledge only "valid deductive arguments from obviously true premises", immune to every conceivable counter-example or edge-case. The right perspective is rather to accept the role that intuitions and pre-philosophical convictions play in the premises of philosophical arguments, and appreciate the detailed "persuasive elaboration" that good argument articulates, especially the fundamental distinctions that this elaboration can produce; distinctions that then become available for all to use and build upon. Gutting ends with an example of accumulated philosophical knowledge that is directly relevant to a different area of discourse. His example area is religious belief, which should be benefiting from philosophical accounts of the faith-reason distinction, qualia-related arguments challenging the dominant physicalist view of human consciousness, distinctions between strong and weak dualism, etc. So does Gutting establish that analytic philosophers have indeed achieved real progress and disciplinary knowledge in the past half-century? Not when his claims are evaluated from a "foundationalist" perspective. But he successfully provides persuasive elaboration for his intuition that philosophy is cumulatively producing an important body of philosophical knowledge, and his insightful distinctions add themselves to the philosophical tool-kit. Professor Gutting's lucid writings on Foucault and other continental philosophers (for example "French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century"), have made a major contribution to rendering continental thought comprehensible to analytically-minded readers. It is a treat to read this latest work in which he turns his clear thinking and writing style to the recent analytic tradition in which he still locates himself, despite "a good deal of work on the continental side of the street".

In this well-written, informative, and stimulating exercise in metaphilosophy, Gary Gutting argues that "there is a body of disciplinary philosophical knowledge achieved by (at least) analytic philosophers of the last fifty years." (2) Philosophers, Gutting argues, "have expert knowledge about a large and important domain of conceptual (or linguistic) distinctions." (241) "Exemplary pieces of philosophy" produced by Quine, Kripke, Gettier, and others have "generated important philosophical knowledge." (4) This knowledge is important not simply for technical reasons, but because (and

Gutting had this retired philosophy prof cheering at this point) those without access to it "will be severely limited in the essential reflective dimension of human existence." (2) Gutting distinguishes second-order and first-order philosophical truths. Second-order truths are about the prospects of general philosophical "pictures," such as empiricism or theism. These truths have been established by way of "persuasive elaboration," showing what we can do with various ideas. (89) This has been done without theoretical formulation, as in the case of Quine's holism, or with it, as in the case of Goldman's reliabilism. (The tendency is to move in the direction of theoretical elaboration.) Thus, I take it, one second-order philosophical truth is: Epistemological holism and reliabilism are worth further theoretical elaboration. (76, 81) First-order philosophical truths are about the subject matter of philosophical pictures. Typically, these truths concern the nature of fundamental distinctions (e.g., analytic-synthetic, naming-describing, knowledge-true opinion). Examples of first-order philosophical truths include: Proper names are rigid designators, (86) and, For a huge number of cases, including almost all everyday ones, the justified-true-belief definition of knowledge is correct. (87) In coming to know these first-order truths, Gutting argues, philosophers have rejected Philosophical Foundationalism, the traditional view according to which "the project of philosophy is to provide compelling arguments for or against our 'convictions,'" our "beliefs about fundamental issues that are deep-rooted in our experiences and practices," (224; e.g., mind-body dualism (237)) "One of the most important achievements of recent philosophy has been to discredit this foundationalism." (224) So another philosophical truth (first-order? second-order?) is evidently: Philosophical Foundationalism is false. Gutting insightfully explores the use of convictions in writings by or about the work of Plantinga, Chalmers, Van Inwagen, Kuhn, and Rawls. This does not mean, however, that convictions float free of logical evaluation. "Convictions that persistently fail to generate defensible theories will be rightly judged non-viable"; (228) e.g., supernaturalism about the mind-body problem. (237) So yet another philosophical truth appears to be something like: Dealing responsibly with convictions requires that they pass philosophical scrutiny. (But doesn't this let Philosophical Foundationalism back in?) Gutting concludes his argument with an essential and thoughtful defense of it against Rorty's rejection of philosophy as a body of disciplinary knowledge, and with an illustration of "the importance of such knowledge outside philosophy by showing the relevance of philosophical results to the evaluation of religious convictions." (6) Gutting gives many other examples of what he takes to be philosophical knowledge. In doing so he not only advances his overall argument; he also delineates central controversies in analytic philosophy over the past half-century. Whether one agrees with his examples, or his overall argument, his engagement with these controversies should be informative and thought-provoking. The book is thoroughly and

interestingly foot-noted, and includes a rich bibliography.

Excellent. You will learn that philosophers have not made substantive progress on the "big questions" (why does anything exist? Is there a God? Do we have life after death), but they have made genuine progress on conceptual issues important to such enterprises as science and religion. You will also learn that philosophical arguments are less "rigorous" than one might have thought and instead rely on underlying intuitions fleshed out by examples. It is well-written and eye-opening.

Existentialist trip that is akin to sifting the trash heap of intellectual poverty. Life is far too short to read Gary Guttman's horrific book, ..10 pages it and it went in the trash

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