

Epistemology for Non-Ideal Conditions. Part 2

written by Tinay Mushdiyeva

In my [previous article](#), I noted that traditional academic epistemology focuses on epistemic success as its object of inquiry. I argued that, for this reason, it is not sufficient for studying epistemic agency as it appears in non-ideal conditions.^[1] By non-ideal epistemic conditions, I mean conditions in which epistemic agency exists, but epistemic failure stands out more sharply than epistemic success. Observable examples of epistemic failure include the lack of development of scientific institutions, the absence of academia, or its dysfunction, the low performance of critical thinking, the dominance of interest in irrational content, superstition, epistemic bubbles, the lack of knowledge people have about the system in which they live, and so on. These are usually summarized with expressions such as *ignorance* or *epistemic backwardness*. The less directly observable side of epistemic failure concerns the distinction and constellation of two different forms of epistemic agency, *knowing* and *knowledge*, within relations of power. In this article, I try to explain epistemic failure through these two forms of epistemic agency. I argue that failure of knowledge should itself be treated as an epistemological phenomenon and as a proper object of epistemology.

Two different forms of epistemic agency. Knowing and knowledge

The object of epistemology is knowledge. When knowledge is obtained, we speak of epistemic success. When we fail to obtain knowledge, we count this as epistemic failure. As the coefficient of epistemic success, traditional epistemology takes the justification component of the classic definition of knowledge as *justified true belief*, hereafter JTB. In other words, epistemic success occurs only if we can *justify* the

truth of our belief.

Knowledge in the JTB sense, which can be seen as the condition of epistemic success, can be imagined as a multistage mental process. Belief and justification are two different mental activities. Justification often comes after belief. It is important to stress the phrase *often* rather than *always*. In some cases, knowledge is not a sequence of staged mental acts in which justification follows belief, but a mental state in which belief and justification are given at the same time. In such cases, we do not distinguish belief and justification at all because they occur within a single act. For example, while waiting for a tram at a stop, I have an optical experience of snowflakes landing on my glasses. I feel the cold sensation of those that land on the tip of my nose. I see a child nearby stick out their tongue to catch snowflakes. I hear the child's mother say something about the snow. All these elements of justification are given to me at once, together with my mental state of "I know that it is snowing." [2] This state is not the same as the mental state "I believe that it is snowing." It is a different state and a different act. Let us call this mental state *knowing*.

In knowing, you are exposed, here and now, at the same time and in an active way, to the belief and justification elements of knowledge in the JTB sense. The mental state in which justification comes after belief is *knowledge*. For example, I believe that a certain article is available in the library. After I log into the library system and find the journal containing the article, my belief becomes justified, and I now know that the journal with the article is in the library. Or, while riding the metro, I believe that it is already snowing outside because my weather app says so. After I exit the metro and see the snow, I know that it is snowing.

I distinguish knowing and knowledge in order to separate two different epistemic states and their corresponding products, which are usually expressed with the same word, knowledge.

Knowing is a reactive epistemic state in which we are directly, holistically, and synchronously exposed to knowledge. Knowledge, on the other hand, is a more complex, staged, mediated, diachronic, and active epistemic act. It is important to pay attention here to the contrast between *reactive* and *active*. In knowing, our consciousness works reactively. It is *exposed to* the phenomenon of knowledge and only responds to it. In knowledge, our consciousness actively organizes the transition from belief to knowledge. It *searches for* justification for the truth of belief. In this sense, knowing is passive agency, while knowledge is active agency. The point of distinguishing knowing and knowledge is precisely to show this difference at the level of agency. Otherwise, it would be enough to distinguish between different types of knowledge as products. The distinction I want to stress is not between types of knowledge, but between two different forms of epistemic agency.

The relation of epistemic agency to needs and resources

While we are simply exposed to knowing, we must spend resources to reach knowledge. These resources can range from attention and time to mental effort, habits of discipline, complex experiments, and money. In order to spend resources, we need motivation. In epistemic activity, this motivation is mostly conditioned by needs (and by their degrees and modifications). Our active epistemic agency reflects our needs and our resources.

What do these considerations have to do with epistemology for non-ideal conditions? As I noted above, traditional academic epistemology focuses on the concept of epistemic success. As the coefficient of epistemic success, it mainly takes scientific and academic knowledge. Scientific and academic knowledge represent professionalized forms of epistemic agency. This means that the relation between epistemic agency and the needs that give rise to it has a representative character. For example, the relation between the epistemic

agency of scientists who research cancer treatment and the needs that motivate this research is not direct. Those scientists do not work in that profession because they themselves suffer from cancer. Rather, they join a form of epistemic agency that has emerged from a need at a macro level, such as the increase of cancer in society, and they join it as specialists, that is, as workers. Their personal needs that draw them into this activity may not coincide with the broader level need that originally gave rise to the activity.

This representative character of needs is normal for epistemic agency in science and academia. However, the forms of epistemic behavior that stand at the center of traditional epistemology are not sufficient for studying the relation between epistemic agency outside science and academia and the needs connected to it. An epistemology focused on science and academic knowledge generally studies knowledge not within relations of needs and resources, but apart from them. In that case, the direction of inquiry automatically shifts toward epistemic success because this approach requires the presence of a *product* to be studied. Such a narrow focus, for example, will not allow epistemology to explain the proportional relation between scientific knowledge and needs against the background of global warming and rising apocalyptic forecasts. It will instead push this issue into the domain of ethics, sociology, and other fields. Yet relatedness to needs is not merely an ethical issue external to epistemic agency. It is a fundamental factor that conditions epistemic agency itself. New generations of critical epistemological approaches have attempted to reflect on this disconnection, but they are still few in number and remain underdeveloped at the theoretical level. They often resemble activist manifestos more than systematic theory.

Another problem is that traditional academic epistemology, with its focus on epistemic success, leaves aside not only the relation between epistemic agency and needs, but also its

relation to resources. If we try to study epistemic agency within the conditionality of resources, *the product* that appears before us as the object of inquiry will more often be examples of epistemic failure rather than epistemic success. These include the dysfunction of scientific institutions or particular intellectual fields, or their total absence, intentional collective ignorance, superstition, epistemic nihilism, proliferation of conspiracy theories and so on. The resulting features of epistemic behavior include reactivity, situationality, collective memory loss, since collective and intergenerational epistemic communication is not systematized or archived, and the inability of complex collective intelligence to form. These phenomena are connected to the fact that epistemic agency is conditioned by the factor of resources. This is not only a matter of the lack of large-scale material resources. The issue is also whether we can reflect on the fact that epistemic agency, even at the level of individual consciousness, is shaped within networks of power relations. Power relations determine both our access to existing epistemic resources and our ability to form our own epistemic resources.

Different constellations of resources and power relations give rise to different epistemic profiles, different epistemic codes, and different epistemic mechanisms. An unfavorable constellation of resources and power relations, that is, poverty, affects not only our physical bodies, but also our epistemic agency. Just as a poor person often appears outwardly worse, is less healthy, and dies earlier, they also know less, in the sense of *knowledge* rather than *knowing*. This may sound banal, but when we think about epistemic agency and its mechanisms, it is not a banal detail at all. Resources and power relations are not just a background for epistemic agency. They directly shape its mechanisms, its form, and its continuity. Put very roughly, poverty changes our brains.

One of the interesting tasks the study of epistemology in non-ideal conditions could undertake would be to analyze and

theorize the relation between the two forms of epistemic agency we distinguished above, knowing and knowledge. A more focused study of this relation could be illuminating, at least in the context of issues discussed in recent social and political philosophy, such as mass irrationality, the *Trump voter phenomenon*, collective indecision, political apathy, and similar topics. For me, this distinction is also interesting in the context of the late Rahman Badalov's distinction between "verbal cultures" and "mute cultures," but that is the subject of another article.

[1] Epistemic agency refers to the capacity of individuals and groups to be subjects of epistemic activities and actions, such as being exposed to knowing, seeking knowledge, acquiring knowledge, and so on.

[2] I set aside Gettier type situations here, where my glasses, my nose, the snowflakes, the child, the mother's voice, and all the details of that moment could be a simulation.

Part 1:

[Epistemology for Non-Ideal Conditions](#)