What (Good) Is Historical Epistemology?

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The central purpose of epistemology, as traditionally understood, is to identify and justify the epistemic basis of knowledge, including scientific knowledge. While epistemology in this sense is one of the strongest branches of contemporary philosophy, its universalizing approach has been criticized in various ways. In particular, it has been suggested that knowledge is always situated in a context (biological, social, historical, material) and that epistemology cannot afford to ignore the features of this context. In this vein, recent decades have seen the emergence of naturalized, social, or feminist epistemologies.

One particular kind of challenge to traditional epistemology has been named “historical epistemology”. Contrary to the other “alternative” epistemologies just mentioned, however, it is not widely known or discussed by contemporary Anglo-American philosophers, but has in recent years been appealed to mostly by historians of science. As it stands, there are various possible conceptions of historical epistemology:

- First, historical epistemology may be viewed as a branch of the history of science, namely one that looks at (a) the histories of epistemic concepts (e.g., observation, rationality, probability) or (b) the histories of the objects of scientific inquiry (e.g., heredity, life, gravity) or (c) the dynamics of scientific developments, as they can be extracted from an analysis of scientific texts or practices. Typically, proponents of such an approach favor a strong contextualization of scientific knowledge and its development, say, by studying the social and cognitive background and the material and experimental practices of science at different times and places.
- Secondly, historical epistemology may be pursued as a philosophical project, namely by thoroughly historicizing epistemology. It starts from the assumption that the standards and forms of what can count as knowledge have histories, which interact with various kinds of knowledge, most especially scientific knowledge. Such a project may then take at least two different directions: (1) One might claim that current epistemological questions and the standard philosophical methods of answering them are only historically relative, and no more valid than those of other times and places. (2) Or one might reject the assumption that to historicize is to relativize, and instead unsettle current epistemological questions and methods by exploring, in a serious historical vein, earlier alternatives in their own philosophical and scientific frameworks.

All of these construals of historical epistemology are faced with challenges. For example, even if its aim is “merely” historical, the choices of concepts, objects, and dynamics under study give rise to historiographical puzzles not only about the status and identity conditions of objects and concepts over time, but also regarding the methods by which historical developments are best to be studied. What, then, is the relationship (if any) between historical epistemology and the methodological turns towards the practices and material cultures of science? Furthermore, from the perspective of the history and philosophy of science, it may be asked what contributions historical epistemology has to make towards a genuinely philosophically informed history of science and/or to a genuinely historically informed
philosophy of science. Historians of philosophy, again, have already for a while accepted the historicity of epistemological questions and their dependence upon past science. They also often acknowledge the possibility of replacing or reforming currently dominant questions in epistemology by looking at their history. Does historical epistemology offer any additional insights to such developments within the history of epistemology? Last but not least, philosophical epistemologists might object that the goal of identifying and justifying the epistemic basis of knowledge most likely cannot be achieved by asking historical questions about past science. Can a case be made that historical epistemology is a philosophically sophisticated project?

In these and other ways, the notion of historical epistemology brings to the fore a variety of debates that are located at the interface between philosophy and the history of science. The basic goal of the conference is to improve these debates by making more precise, and put to the test, different versions of historical epistemology. It will be structured, on the one hand, around specific themes from recent writings in historical epistemology – epistemic concepts, practices, and objects, and the dynamics that shape scientific research. On the other hand, the conference will also move to the level of both historical and philosophical reflection by asking: What kind of historical enterprise is historical epistemology? What are its basic assumptions, and what are their rationales? Moreover, in what sense is such a focus on epistemic categories and practices itself a form of epistemology? Can and should epistemology be done in this way?

**Format of the Conference**

The conference is structured along the following four themes:

1. Epistemic concepts and practices (e.g., observation, experiment, explanation)
2. Epistemic objects (e.g., temperature, viruses, brain function)
3. The dynamics of scientific research (e.g., cognitive modeling of scientific change)
4. Reflections about historiography and epistemology (what does historical epistemology teach us about the history of science, what does it teach us about epistemology?)

(For more details, see the program.)