Certainty and Evidence

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1. Idealized epistemology. Rather than take as its goal the ambition to analyze the concept of knowledge, or to mark the precise boundaries between what does and does not count as knowledge, pre-modern philosophy aspired, first, to describe the epistemic ideal that human beings might hope to achieve, and then, second, to chart the various ways in which we commonly fall off from that ideal.

*Aristotelian epistémē* concerns a proposition that is necessary and universal, known on the basis of an affirmative demonstration in the first syllogistic figure, the premises of which are necessary and explanatory of the conclusion: “when we think we know of the explanation (aition) because of which the object holds that it is its explanation, and also that it is not possible for it to be otherwise” (*Post. An. I.2, 71b9-12*).

*Medieval scientia*: “This is the end and the most perfect and the sole unconditionally desirable thing among the logical sciences” (Albert the Great, *In Post. an. I.1.1*).

*Aquinas's commentary on Aristotle's definition*: “When [Aristotle] says *we think we have scientia*, etc. [71b9], he offers a definition of having *scientia simpliciter*. With respect to this we should consider that to have *scientia* of something is to cognize it perfectly. This, however, is to apprehend its truth perfectly, for the same things are principles of a thing’s existence and of its truth, as is clear from *Metaphysics* II [993b23-30]. Therefore [a] one who has *scientia*, if he is cognizing perfectly, must cognize the cause of the thing of which he has *scientia*. [b] If, however, he were to cognize the cause only, then he would not yet cognize the effect actually (which is to have *scientia simpliciter*), but only virtually (which is to have *scientia secundum quid* and as it were *per accidens*). Hence he who has *scientia simpliciter* must also cognize the application of cause to effect. But [c] since *scientia* is also a certain cognition of the thing, and someone cannot cognize with certainty a thing that possibly stands otherwise, it thus must further be the case that an object of *scientia* cannot stand otherwise. Therefore, since [a] *scientia* is perfect cognition, he thus says *When we think we cognize the cause*; but because [b] it is an actual cognition through which we have *scientia simpliciter*, he adds: *And that it is its cause*; and because [c] it is a certain cognition, he adds *And it is not possible for it to stand otherwise* (*In Post. an. I.4 n. 5*).

2. Certainty as part of the ideal. Not in Aristotle. But lots of other overlapping sources:

a) Stoicism, from which it works its way into Augustine: “I do not call anything *scientia* where the person who professes it is sometimes mistaken. *Scientia* does not consist merely in the matters that are apprehended. Instead, it consists in the fact that they are apprehended in such a way that nobody should be in error about it or vacillate when pressed by any opponents” (*Contra academicos I.7.19*).

b) Alexandria in late antiquity, e.g. Ptolemy: “only mathematics can provide sure and unshakable knowledge (eidesin) to its devotees.” As for physics and metaphysics, “they should be called guesswork rather than knowledge (katalépsin epistémoniken)…. There is no hope that philosophers will ever be agreed about them” (*Almagest 1.1*).

c) The Islamic tradition, where ‘certainty’ (*yaqīn*) appears throughout the Arabic *Posterior Analytics*. See Deborah Black, “Knowledge (*ilm*) and Certitude (*yaqin*)”
3. **What is certainty?** The core meanings of ‘certainty’ are fixedness and stability. But when it comes to belief we can understand such stability to hold with respect to either the belief’s subject or its object. **Subjectively** speaking, certainty requires indubitability, a fixedness of belief so great as not admit of any doubt on the believer’s part. **Objectively** speaking, certainty requires infallibility, which means that the belief is not just true but also incapable of going wrong. Both these senses are found throughout scholastic texts.

4. **Conditional certainty.** A critical third kind of certainty, conditional upon the evidence, is generally neglected in scholastic texts. To recognize in general what we now call *epistemic probability*, scholastic authors would have needed to pull together three things: (a) the idea of conditional necessity (something they had); (b) some sort of conception of evidence (which they also had); (c) an interest in our knowledge of contingent particulars (which they mainly lacked).

5. **Evidentness.** Although little attention has been paid to the notion of ‘evidentia’ in scholastic or 17C texts, this is the fundamental epistemic concept of this period. It is, very roughly, the pre-modern analogue to our concept of justification, inasmuch as it is what distinguishes mere true belief from counting as something like knowledge.

   - **Aquinas:** “certainty can imply two things. First, it implies firmness of adherence… It also implies the evidentness of what one assents to, and in this way it is not faith that has certainty, but *scientia* and understanding” (*Quaest. de veritate* 14.1 ad 7). See also the commentary on Hebrews: “intellectual assent can happen in two ways: in one way, because the intellect is moved to assent from the evidentness of its object….; in another way, it assents to something not on account of the evidentness of its object…” (11.1).
   - **Scotus:** “*scientia* is a certain cognition of a necessary truth that is suited to have evidentness through something else that is necessary, prior, and evident, connected to it through syllogistic discourse” (*Rep.* IA, prol. q. 1 n. 8).
   - **Ockham:** “What is *scientia*? …. It is the evident awareness (*notitia*) of a necessary truth, suited to be caused through premises connected to it through syllogistic discourse” (*Ord.* prol. q. 2 [*Opera theol.* I:87-88]).
   - **Domingo de Soto** (16C): “we are said to have *scientia* of that alone … which we grasp with the mind’s firm reason – namely, that which the intellect intuits with a manifest vision. Thus *scientia*, in its general name, is the same as evidentness” (*De demonstratione* q. 2, p. 294L).
   - **Hobbes:** “There are two things necessarily implied in this word knowledge; the one is truth, the other evidence; for what is not true can never be known…. Likewise, if the truth be not evident, though a man holds it, yet is his knowledge of it no more than theirs that hold the contrary. For if truth were enough to make it knowledge, all truths were known: which is not so” (*Elements of Law* I.6.2 [=*Human Nature* 6.2]).

6. **What is ‘evidentia’?**
   - A. The evidentness of a cognitive object; i.e., *a thing’s being evident.*
   - B. The evidentness of a cognition that grasps such an object; i.e., *an evident cognition.*
   - C. That which makes something be evident; i.e., *the evidence.*

7. **A new epistemic ideal.** Not certainty, but proportionality. Its greatest expression is in Locke’s *Essay: “… the mind if it will proceed rationally ought to examine all the grounds of probability, and see how they make more or less, for or against any probable proposition, before it assents to or dissents from it, and upon a due balancing the whole, reject or receive it, with a more or less firm assent, proportionally to the preponderancy of the greater grounds of probability on one side or the other”* (IV.15.5).