

REVIEW OF MONA SIMION,
KNOWLEDGE-FIRST EPISTEMOLOGY: A DEFENCE,
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Mona Simion's *Knowledge-First Epistemology: A Defence* is a compact, technically precise, and ambitious contribution to the Cambridge Elements series. Its aim is to accomplish something that many knowledge-first theorists have either deferred or pursued only piecemeal: to offer a unified, independently motivated account of the entire normative architecture of epistemology — justified belief, reasons, evidence, defeat, assertion, and reasoning — anchored in a single functional thesis. The result is one of the most systematically integrated presentations of the knowledge-first programme to date, and one that merits serious engagement from epistemologists across a wide range of commitments.

Summary and Argumentative Structure

The Element unfolds in five sections. Section 1 establishes the central thesis: the main etiological epistemic function (*e-function*) of our practice of inquiry is to generate knowledge. Simion borrows the normative apparatus of etiological functionalism from philosophy of biology — particularly the Millikan-Neander tradition — and deploys it to argue that knowledge occupies the role that biological benefit plays in grounding biological functions. Since inquiry has historically produced knowledge, producing knowledge has resulted in epistemic benefit, and this history contributes to the explanation of why inquiry persists, knowledge meets the *E-Function* schema. Functions of this kind, she argues, generate norms of proper functioning: just as a heart *ought* to beat at a particular rate because that is the reliable way it fulfils its function under normal conditions, our belief-forming capacities *ought* to operate in ways reliably conducive to knowledge in normal conditions.

Section 2 builds on this to defend *Knowledge-First Functionalism* (KFF): a belief is *prima facie* epistemically justified if and only if it is generated by a properly functioning cognitive capacity that has the epistemic etiological function of generating knowledge. This allows for justified false beliefs, justification in Gettier cases, and a principled distinction between justified believers and the merely

blameless — thereby addressing classical problems for both JB=K and virtue-theoretic approaches. Section 3 integrates KFF with a probabilistic account of evidence and defeat as knowledge- and ignorance-indicators, respectively, departing from Williamson's E=K (2000) by replacing the having-relation with a "being-in-a-position-to-know" framework grounded in qualitative, quantitative, and environmental availability. Sections 4 and 5 close the system: Section 4 argues that there is no genuinely *epistemic* norm for action, since action in general serves no epistemic function, whereas assertion, as a practice with the etiological function of generating testimonial knowledge, is governed by the knowledge norm. Section 5 defends a unified knowledge norm for both practical and theoretical reasoning, resolving the apparent tension between the two.

Strengths

Several features of this work stand out. First, the use of etiological functionalism as a normative ground is philosophically productive and underexploited in analytic epistemology. Rather than relying on constitutive norm models — Williamson's (2000) analogy with games — or on bare intuition pumping, Simion provides an account of *why* knowledge is normatively central: because it is what our epistemic practices have been selected for in virtue of generating. This naturalistic grounding gives the knowledge-first programme the kind of prior plausibility argument it has historically lacked, and Simion develops it with care.

Second, the distinction between function fulfilment and proper functioning is put to excellent use. It allows Simion to explain how a properly functioning cognitive capacity can yield a justified false belief (when environmental conditions are unfavourable) and how an improperly functioning capacity can, by luck, produce knowledge — a structural nuance that most rival accounts flatten. This also explains the split between justified false belief and mere blameless norm violation without ad hoc appeals to normative pluralism.

Third, the treatment of defeat in Section 3 is among the most careful in recent literature. The unified probabilistic account of rebutting and undercutting defeaters is well-argued, and the critique of Lasonen-Aarnio's (2014) and Williamson's scepticism about higher-order defeat is pointed and effective. The *Friendly Detective* case battery is philosophically illuminating and succeeds in putting genuine pressure on E=K from an angle that has not been fully exploited elsewhere.

Fourth, the move in Section 4 — denying an epistemic norm for action while preserving an epistemic norm for practical reasoning — is a genuinely novel structural contribution. Rather than retreating under pressure from umbrella cases and high-stakes scenarios, Simion redraws the normative geography itself. The

function-based individuation principle is well-supported, and the resulting picture of normative conflict between epistemic and prudential requirements is more realistic than the monolithic approaches it replaces.

Critical Observations

Three interconnected concerns deserve attention, not to undermine the project but to flag where its foundations call for further development.

The idealization of “normal conditions.” The etiological framework generates norms by asking how a capacity fulfils its function *in normal conditions*. Much of the weight in Simion’s argument — particularly in KFF and the derivation of the knowledge norm of reasoning — rests on this qualification. In the biological case, “normal conditions” can be specified with some precision by reference to ancestral environments and selection pressures. In the epistemic case, however, what counts as “normal” remains significantly underdetermined. Simion acknowledges that epistemic environments can be “inhospitable” and that knowledge obtained by unreliable processes is “the exception,” but she does not offer a principled account of what demarcates the normal from the abnormal epistemic environment, nor of who gets to draw that line. This matters because the boundaries of “normalcy” are not simply given: what constitutes a reliable belief-forming process in one epistemic environment may prove systematically unreliable in another. The account would benefit from a more explicit treatment of how normal conditions are individuated, and from some acknowledgement that this individuation is not a purely cognitive affair.

The availability framework and social situatedness. Section 3’s “being-in-a-position-to-know” account of the having-relation is one of the most original contributions of the work. Simion introduces qualitative, quantitative, and environmental dimensions of availability, and, notably, includes “social normative situatedness” as a determinant of environmental availability. This is philosophically promising: it allows the account to predict that obligations to inquire can generate evidential duties (Goldberg 2018), and that biased cognizers may be in breach of epistemic obligations even when their bias is cognitively entrenched. What remains underdeveloped, however, is the social dimension itself. How social roles constrain what is “normatively available” is introduced through examples — reading the newspaper, not the letter under the doormat — without being grounded in a principled account of how the social production of epistemic environments interacts with individual conditions for knowledge generation. Given that the *Friendly Detective* cases and the discussion of sexist cognizers place considerable weight on

precisely this dimension, a more developed treatment would do real work here and is, perhaps, the most natural next step for the programme.

The “ready availability” of knowledge and the non-standard epistemic subject. Simion relies on the empirical claim that knowledge is the most “readily available” epistemic standing — that forming beliefs in inhospitable environments or via unreliable processes is “the exception.” This background assumption carries considerable normative freight. The achievability argument (that knowledge is more easily obtained than either mere true belief or certainty) depends on a relatively optimistic picture of standard epistemic conditions. Yet a substantial body of work in social epistemology and testimony has documented structural asymmetries in epistemic access, showing that “normal” knowledge generation can be systematically more difficult for certain groups of agents due to factors largely independent of their individual cognitive capacities. If the etiological argument requires knowledge to be “readily available,” and if availability is partly socially produced, then the normative structure derived from it is not solely a function of cognitive architecture but also of social architecture — a point that the framework, in its current form, leaves unaddressed.

A fourth, more internal concern: the argument in Section 2 for premise (5) — that belief formation systems successfully represent if and only if they generate knowledge — is the most philosophically contentious step in the a priori argument for KFF. Simion’s Putnam-inspired discussion of the Ant and the Dancer cases is suggestive, but the transition from “representation is incompatible with intervening luck” to “representation is incompatible with environmental luck (Fake Barns)” requires the additional claim that risky-but-true belief is “too risky *simpliciter* to be a good token of its type.” This is a defensible position, but the evaluative asymmetry that licenses it — why attributive goodness for beliefs tracks safety from environmental luck rather than, say, process reliability — is not argued for as directly as the complexity of the step warrants. The analogy with the knife’s sharpness as the measure of attributive goodness is apt but compressed. A fuller defence of why the evaluative norm for belief maps onto knowledge rather than onto safety-adjusted true belief would strengthen what is, after all, the load-bearing premise of the entire a priori argument.

Overall Assessment

Knowledge-First Epistemology: A Defence succeeds at something genuinely difficult: it makes the knowledge-first programme feel not just coherent but *motivated*. Rather than treating knowledge as a brute primitive justified only by its theoretical fruitfulness, Simion gives it a natural history — or at least a principled

analogue of one. Whether one finds etiological functionalism compelling in this application or not, the argumentative structure she builds on it is tight and the coverage impressively unified. The concerns raised here are, with one exception, concerns about the programme's future development rather than failures of the current argument: the exception being the gap in Section 2's a priori case for KFF, which is the most philosophically ambitious and also the most in need of reinforcement. Researchers in social epistemology and those sympathetic to non-individualist accounts of epistemic norms will find the availability framework in Section 3 a productive starting point for further engagement. This is, in sum, a significant contribution to one of the most active research programmes in contemporary epistemology, and one that will be difficult to ignore.

References

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