

Understanding Binarisms
An Epistemological Account of Binary Opposition

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CERTIFICATE

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signed .

[Redacted Signature]

J.L. Reilly

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For
William John Miles
in gratitude for his contribution to my education

and for
Rebecca Reilly-Miles
by way of apology.

Abstract

The epistemological analysis offered in this work is contextualised in public epistemological practices. It falls into three parts:

Part I, 'Opposition' gives an epistemological account of our use of oppositional categorisation as a taxonomic strategy employing certain simple epistemic tools. Opposites are maximally saliently different sub-categories of a background epistemic field defined by a salient similarity. Oppositional classification is especially attractive to us because its structure satisfies our obligation (defended by Kant) to reconcile the conflicting maxims of seeking both unity and diversity in our taxonomic activities. Oppositional classification defines and partitions a field of epistemic objects for ease of epistemic manipulation. It is based upon the mutually functional application of two forms of negation which I call 'spotlight' and 'toggle' negations: the former posits a background field of saliently similar objects, and the latter mutually exclusively and exhaustively partitions that field into saliently different subcategories. Variations both in the application of these tools and in the kinds of epistemological objects mapped by the epistemic field account for the different kinds of opposition. One such variation is scalar opposition. The good/bad contrast examined in Part II is an instance of scalar opposition.

Part II, 'The Good/Bad Contrast' applies the analysis from Part I to value opposition, as paradigmatically represented by the good/bad contrast. The good/bad contrast is a scalar opposition, in that the epistemic field it divides organises objects arranged on *better than* scales (on *better than* scalar fields). Value differences supervene on descriptive differences; similarly, the *better than* scalar field supervenes upon some descriptive epistemic field. The good/bad opposition partitioning the *better than* field exploits a di-or trichotomising descriptive partition of the descriptive field which preserves the *better than* relation between the resulting categories. This creates a jointly descriptive and evaluative opposition. The different logical properties and roles of the kinds of descriptive criteria used to construct partitions over *better than* fields (including good-makers, better-makers and intensifiers) are defined and explained, and some significant structural characteristics of evaluative epistemic fields are discussed. These include 'overridingness', which is a feature of 'nested' evaluative fields. The structure of nested evaluative fields explain many features of the systemic connexions between the power-inflected epistemic constructions examined in Part III.

Part III, 'Understanding Binarisms', introduces the notion of 'power-inflected epistemic materials' in public knowledge-systems. Practical reason is employed in this Part as an organising

background framework for an analysis of the relations between power phenomena and epistemic phenomena in public epistemological contexts. It is argued that these relations are governed by the political imperative of influencing the choices of practical reasoners through lying or deceptive justification ('persuasion'). This persuasion trades upon the epistemological connexions between descriptive and evaluative knowledge and choice, and is facilitated by the deceptive use of legitimate epistemic strategies and tools used to organise and communicate descriptive, evaluative and practical information in public epistemological contexts. The epistemological analyses from Parts I and II are then applied to an analysis of those power-inflected epistemic materials known as 'binarisms' (also 'dualisms', 'binary oppositions', 'dichotomies', etc.), and are demonstrated to provide detailed substantiating evidence for some important politico-epistemological accounts of binaristic constructions, including those of Genevieve Lloyd and Val Plumwood, as well as facilitating detailed elaboration of such accounts.

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General Introduction: Understanding Binarisms

The epistemological analysis offered in this work takes as its object the construction and dissemination of knowledge in public knowledge-systems. I argue that the public handling of knowledge creates a 'selection' and 'distillation' effect over the strategies and tools employed in its construction; the strategies and tools that I identify and explain are validated by this 'selection' as simple, basic and useful human epistemological strategies and tools. I have attempted to keep my account as simple and as accessible as possible; in particular it does not presuppose any background in logic, and it is not intended as a logical treatise, but rather as 'broad-brush' epistemology which occasionally expresses simple and general rules in the vocabulary of logical discourses.

The work does presuppose, however, an epistemological paradigm which recognises knowledge to be a human art, the product of the cooperatively creative activity of human beings, with characteristic features arising both from the extraordinary creative and organisational skills and capacities of human beings, and from the particular teloses of the epistemological and wider practices in which this activity has its point. While there are many possible practical teloses for human thinking and reasoning, I argue that there are three broad specifically epistemological teloses for it. These answer the questions 'What is the case?', 'What should be the case?' and 'What ought to be done?'. These teloses characterise descriptive, evaluative and practical reasoning, respectively. These different kinds of reasoning contain analogous guiding principles and employ identical basic epistemic strategies and tools. While each kind draws upon and mutually interacts with the other, we can view them as in principle cumulatively arranged, with evaluative information drawing upon descriptive information, and practical information drawing upon both descriptive and evaluative information.

This model of the three teloses of human epistemological activity can also provide a general organisational framework for interpreting the arguments in the different Parts of this work, that is, they are cumulatively arranged, with Part II drawing upon Part I, and Part III drawing upon both Parts I and II.

Because the epistemological account offered here is contextualised in public epistemological practices, however, contextual power relations will be relevant to the account insofar as they influence the epistemic strategies employed and the

resulting epistemic artifacts. In Part III I use the account of legitimate epistemic construction defended in Parts I and II as a standard against which what I call **power-inflected** epistemic materials can be identified and analysed. I explain how the power imperative of influencing the choices of practical reasoners through **persuasion** accounts for the patterns both of coincidence with, and divergence from, legitimate epistemic constructions which are identifiable in power-inflected epistemic materials, in particular in those epistemic materials known as 'binarisms', 'binary oppositions', 'dualisms', or 'dichotomies'.

In the course of this work, I offer solutions to various persistent philosophical problems: first, I provide a systematic account of opposition which is able to accommodate the many apparently different kinds of opposition and account for their differences. Second, I provide the groundwork of potential solutions to various logical problems connected with negation semantics, by distinguishing two different functional forms of negation and explaining their proper (mutual) epistemic function. Third, I provide an account of the relations between 'categorical' concepts and the 'comparatives' logically connected with them. Fourth, in connexion with this, I offer a solution to what has generally been an intractable problem in axiology; that is, the logical and epistemological relationship between the good/bad or positive/negative value contrast and the comparative *better than*. This solution has implications for the more general interpretation of both the function and semantics of contrasts such as the 'affirmation/negation' and 'permissible/impermissible' contrasts. Fifth, I give a logical account of the relation of overridingness, and in addition of the sources of its connexions with the moral. And finally, I combine elements of each of these solutions in an account of those influential and politically significant patterns of oppositionally-constructed conceptual contrasts which have plagued, at the very least, Western public knowledge-systems.

The general aim of this work, however, is to provide a framework and tools for an analysis of the relations between power phenomena and epistemic phenomena. Systematic analyses of these relations can guide interventions in public knowledge-systems (such as the advocacy of the rethinking or reworking of some concept or contrast) that are intended to break the functional ties between power relations and the power-inflected epistemic materials serving them.