

Lloyd P. Gerson, *Ancient Epistemology*  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009

Reviewed By Bogdan Baghiu<sup>1</sup>

*Ancient Epistemology* is the fifth book of Lloyd P. Gerson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto, and a well known and appreciated specialist in ancient Greek philosophy (especially Plato and Aristotle). His books on this topic include *God and Greek Philosophy* (1990), *Knowing persons. A Study in Plato* (2004) or *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (2006).

The main idea of this book is that “ancient epistemology is a form of naturalism, that is, an account of cognition in general rooted in an understanding of the natural world to which humans belong and also from which they somehow stand apart as observers or thinkers.” (p. 1.) In other words, in Gerson’s opinion, *all* the ancient philosophers of knowledge (from the Presocratics to the Sceptics and Neo-platonists) were naturalists, i. e. they “shared the belief that knowledge is a natural state or a ‘natural kind’ and that it is possible to have incorrect or correct accounts of what that is.” (p. 2.) In this respect, they are very different from contemporary epistemologists who think of knowledge in terms of the Standard Analysis (i.e. as justified true belief). In opposition with these contemporary epistemologists, ancient epistemologists did not think that knowledge is a sort of belief (but rather a natural feature of human life like digestion or pregnancy), or that justification is a necessary condition for knowledge, or that knowledge is only of propositions (knowledge ‘that’). But, although they conceived knowledge as a ‘natural kind,’ ancient epistemologists did not think that knowledge is or must be an object of scientific investigation in the same way as other natural states. From this perspective, they are also very different from contemporary naturalists like W.v.O. Quine, Hilary Kornblith or Timothy Williamson. In opposition with

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contemporary epistemological naturalism, the naturalism of ancient epistemologists was “a naturalism that rejects the claim that the natural sciences provide the foundation for epistemology.” (p. 12.)

These are very interesting and provocative ideas, especially because they are very strong (and, I have no doubt, controversial) and because they are in opposition with the ‘standard’ idea that the Standard Analysis of knowledge is an ancient thesis. So, after Gettier, most epistemologists think that this analysis of knowledge was adopted for the first time by Plato, in *Theaetetus*. In fact, Gerson argues, Plato rejected this analysis on the grounds that knowledge is not a sort of belief. The real beginning of the Standard Analysis is in the seventeenth century, with the philosophers engaged in providing the epistemological foundations for the new science. (p. 3.)

Very provocative, as well, is Gerson’s idea that ancient naturalism is a viable epistemological position and that contemporary epistemologists can learn many things from ancient epistemologists. I think he is right. So, I recommend this book as a must-read not only to all those interested in the history of epistemology, but also to those interested in contemporary epistemological problems.