I. More basics

A. Belief

Belief: a particular kind of mental state, which has (at least) the following properties:

• A belief has content
• Any belief can be assessed as true or false
• Any belief can be assessed as justified/unjustified

1. What is content?

For any belief, we can fill in the following blank:

• Person S believes that __________.

What goes into the blank is called the propositional content of the belief.

Propositional contents are built up out of conceptual contents.¹

• Concepts: words :: Propositions : declarative sentences
  o Ex. The proposition *Rabbits are furry* can only be understood by someone who grasps the concepts of *rabbit*, *are*, and *furry*.

B. Truth

Propositional contents specify truth conditions, i.e. conditions that, if satisfied, would make the belief true. The general structure is as follows: S’s belief that *p* is true if and only if *p*.

• Ex1. I believe that *Middlebury is in Vermont*. The propositional content, *Middlebury is in Vermont*, specifies the conditions wherein the belief is true, namely if and only if Middlebury is in Vermont.

• Ex2. I believe that *Middlebury is in Egypt*. The propositional content, *Middlebury is in Egypt*, specifies the conditions wherein this belief is true, namely if and only if Middlebury is in Egypt. However, those conditions aren’t satisfied, which is precisely why the belief is false.

Boghossian also stipulates that for any propositional content, *p* is true if and only if it’s a fact that *p*. We can also use the capacity of concepts to refer to objects and denote properties to talk about truth.

• Ex3. My belief that *Middlebury is in Egypt* is true if and only if the entity referred to by the concept *Middlebury* has the property denoted by the concept *is in Egypt*.

C. Justification/rationality

Rational beliefs = justified beliefs

Epistemic reasons for belief: a consideration or observation that increases the likelihood of the belief’s truth.

Pragmatic reasons for belief = the practical advantages of believing something.

Both pragmatic and epistemic reasons are:

• Fallible: one can have good reasons to believe something false; and
• Defeasible: *r* can be a good reason to believe *p* at one time and then, as a result of further information, *r* can cease to be a good reason to believe *p* at a later time.

II. The classical conception of knowledge

A. Important ways in which knowledge is “antisocial”

Objectivism about facts: many facts are independent of our minds and social arrangements. Even if thinking beings had never existed, the world would still have had many of the properties that it currently has.

Objectivism about justification: facts of the form—information *E* justifies belief *B*—are society-independent facts. In particular, whether or not some item of information justifies a given belief does not depend on the contingent needs and interests of any community.

Objectivism about rational explanations: Under the appropriate circumstances, our exposure to evidence alone is capable of explaining why we believe what we believe.

¹ NB: Often, we simply say that propositions are composed of concepts.
B. Uncontroversial social influences on knowledge

Some knowledge is produced collaboratively
Social interests may influence the things we seek to know, e.g., which questions are more interesting
Social interests may also bias inquirers

III. Constructivism about knowledge

Equal validity: There are many radically different, yet “equally valid” ways of knowing the world, with science being just one of them.

A. Challenges to the classical view

Constructivism about facts: the world which we seek to understand and know is not what it is independently of us and our social context; rather, all facts are socially constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests.

Constructivism about justification: facts of the form—information $E$ justifies belief $B$—are not what they are independently of us and our social context; rather all such facts are constructed in a way that reflects our contingent needs and interests.

Constructivism about rational explanations: it is never possible to explain why we believe what we believe solely on the basis of our exposure to the relevant evidence; our contingent needs must also be invoked.

B. Social construction

“Ordinary notion of social construction” $x$ is socially constructed if and only if $x$ was intentionally created by a group of people organized in a particular way, with particular values, interests, and goals.

Three typical departures from the ordinary notion in the epistemological debates:

1. Facts, not things, are socially constructed.
2. The facts are facts only because they are socially constructed; they could not have been facts through any non-constructive way.
3. The facts are constructed so as to reflect a society’s contingent needs and interests.

Summing up:

A fact is socially constructed if and only if it is necessarily true that it could only have obtained through the contingent actions of a social group.