



GST-05 Epistemic Reflexivity

Formal Description

Epistemic Reflexivity is the property of a theoretical or cognitive system by which it recognises itself as part of the reality it describes.

Plain English Explanation

Epistemic reflexivity means recognising that scientists and observers are themselves part of the systems they study.

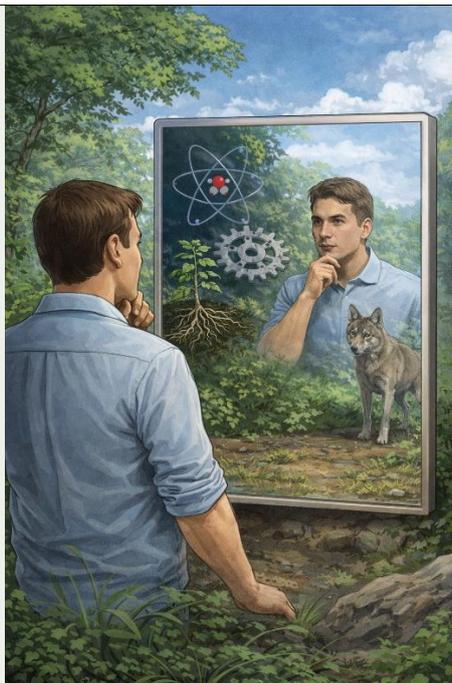
For example, social scientists studying society are themselves members of that society.

Because observers are part of the systems they study, their models can influence those systems, for example, through decisions, policies, or communication.

Sociologist Margaret Archer has shown that individuals differ in how they reflect on their situation.

She identifies different types of reflexivity, including communicative, autonomous, and meta-reflexive modes.

This means that reflexivity is not only necessary, but also variable: different people and systems reflect on themselves in different ways, with different consequences.



Example 1 – Sociology

Researchers studying organisations are themselves participants in social systems.

Example 2 – Ecology

Human observers studying ecosystems are also organisms interacting with those ecosystems.



Provenance and Links

The concept of reflexivity has roots in philosophy and the social sciences:

- Socrates – early emphasis on self-examination (“know thyself”)
- George Herbert Mead – development of the self through social interaction
- Anthony Giddens – reflexivity in modern social systems and self-identity
- Pierre Bourdieu – reflexivity in relation to social structures and scientific practice
- Margaret Archer – differentiation of reflexivity types (communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexive)

In Critical Realism, reflexivity arises from the recognition that observers are part of the systems they study.

In EFGST, this is extended by recognising that cognition is a physical process within those systems, making reflexivity a necessary feature of systems involving human agents.

Practical Exercise

Think of a system you are part of (for example a university, workplace, or community).
Explain how studying that system might be influenced by your own role within it.