Epistemology, the theory of knowledge as pursued by philosophers, has changed a great deal in the last fifty years. This is how things look today (or at least how they looked the other day).

Logic

The most important point in contemporary epistemology concerns the relation (or should I say the lack of a relation) between logic and epistemology. The point is that principles of logic are not principles of reasoning.

Until recently, there has been a persistent tendency in epistemology to confuse logical issues about implication and consistency with epistemological issues about reasoning and change in view. But it is easy to see that these are distinct issues.

For one thing, principles of logic like modus ponens do not have a psychological or epistemological subject matter. They do not say anything about what someone should believe or infer. Nor is there any obvious connection between principles of logic and principles about what people should believe. The fact that a proposition is implied by your beliefs does not guarantee that you should infer it, since, for one thing, it may conflict with other beliefs of yours, and in any event, you should not clutter your thought by making inferences for the sake of making inferences for the sake of making inferences (see Harman 1986, ch. 1 and 2, and also Goldman 1986).

Modus Ponens is the principle that a conditional proposition, if $P$ then $Q$, and the proposition comprising its antecedent, $P$, jointly imply the consequent, $Q$. The principle is not (as it is sometimes called) a rule of inference. It does not say that from if $P$ then $Q$ and $P$ you can infer $Q$. It says nothing about inference at all. It says nothing about what you or anyone else may or can do. It is not about that. The principle may be understood, perhaps, to say that the implication in question is a 'valid implication'. But it should not be understood to say anything about 'valid inference.' The whole notion of 'valid inference' is a category mistake, confusing implication and inference. Anyone who tells you that modus ponens is a rule of inference is not your friend.

It may be useful to observe that none of the following principles has the strict generality that is characteristic of principles of logic.

- Your beliefs should be deductively closed.
• Your beliefs should be consistent.
• Your degrees of belief should be probabilistically coherent.

One way to appreciate the lack of strict generality in such principles is to observe that you have limited resources. You cannot afford to devote all your resources to trying to believe all the consequences of your beliefs or to making your beliefs consistent or probabilistically coherent. You have other things to do with your time.

This is not to deny the importance for epistemology of commitment, where commitment is in part to be explained in terms of something like implication. If you are committed to something that you also have reason to disbelieve, that can be a reason to modify your view. But this reason may not carry much weight in relation to others. You may wish to have lunch first, before figuring out how best to modify your view. After lunch you may want to take a nap. After your nap you may have other things to do.

It is not implication in its full ancestral glory but obvious or immediate implication that is relevant to epistemology. You do not have any reason at all to believe something whose proof is beyond the powers of anyone now alive, even though it is implied by things you presently accept. At best you have a reason to accept the first steps of this unknown proof. And you may not even have a reason to do that. You do not always have a reason to infer what follows immediately from what you now accept. It is not the case that you should clutter your mind with trivia, for example. You need a reason to be interested in one or another immediate consequence of your view. (We will come back to this.)

Ignoring the difference between logic and the theory of reasoning has had and continues to have serious bad effects in the theory of knowledge and the philosophy of science. For one thing, there is the ill fated enterprise of "inductive logic." The thought behind inductive logic goes something like this:
• Deductive logic is the theory of deductive reasoning.
• Much reasoning is not deductive reasoning.
• Call that reasoning inductive reasoning.
• We need a theory of inductive reasoning.
• So, we need an inductive logic

This goes wrong, because as I have already mentioned, a logic is not the same thing as a theory of reasoning. In particular, there are no deductive principles of reasoning; there are only deductive principles of implication.

So, one bad result of this persistent error is the search for an inductive logic. Related bad results include the search for relevance logic and the search for the practical syllogism.