Phil. 159: Epistemology
Jan. 25, 2022

Lecture 1: Introduction

I. What Is Epistemology?

To first approximation, *epistemology* (from the Greek word 'episteme' meaning 'knowledge') is the philosophical study of knowledge: its nature, it sources, its structure, and its limitations.

> During the Watergate hearings, Howard Baker famously asked, "What did the President know and when did he know it?" This is a question about knowledge, but it's not one that we will be studying. Epistemology asks more general questions about standards, concepts, and methodology.
>
> In effect, what we'll be asking is: "What can we know and how can we know it?"

II. Some Knowledge We Take Ourselves to Have

Here are some things I take myself to know right now:

a. Facts about my present thoughts and feelings: e.g. *that I feel a slight pain in my right side.*
b. Facts about my presently perceived environment: e.g. *that I'm in a classroom right now.*
c. Facts about the larger perceptible world beyond my present experience: e.g. *that there's a computer sitting on the desk in my office right now.*
d. Facts about my personal past that I actually experienced: e.g. *that I rode my bike to campus earlier today.*
e. Facts about the past that were not part of my personal experience: e.g. *that the American Revolutionary War began on April 19, 1775.*
f. Facts about the thoughts and feelings of others: e.g. *that Malcolm is slightly bored right now.*
g. Facts that none of us can directly observe: e.g. *that gases consist of tiny molecules.*
h. Facts about the future: e.g. *that Malcolm will deliver a guest lecture on April 12, because I will be out of town.*
i. Conceptual truths: e.g. *that all polysyllabic words have more than one syllable.*
j. Mathematical truths: e.g. *that there are infinitely many primes.*
k. Moral (and, more generally, normative) truths: e.g. *that I ought to isolate myself if I contract COVID-19.*

III. The Nature of Knowledge

One question we can ask about knowledge is:

> *question #1*: What does it even mean to say that I know the things listed in (a) through (k)? That is, what *conditions* or *criteria* must be satisfied for me to count as knowing something?

Here is one traditional answer to that question:

> *the justified-true-belief analysis of knowledge*: Subject S knows that *p* if and only if:
>
> i. S believes that *p*,
> ii. it is true that *p*, and
> iii. S's belief that *p* is justified [*or*: warranted; *or*: rational; *or*: reasonable].

In a famous 3-page article from 1963, Edmund Gettier offered a counterexample to this account. The task of trying to discover a more acceptable analysis of knowledge has come to be known as 'the Gettier problem'.

IV. The Sources of Knowledge

Another question we can ask about knowledge is:

> *question #2*: Supposing that I do know the things listed in (a) through (k), *how* do I know them? That is, what is the *source* or *basis* of my knowledge?

Traditionally, the sources of knowledge have been taken to include at least the following:

perception;
introspection;
memory;
testimony;
inference/reasoning;
rational insight/intuition.

V. The Structure of Knowledge

A third question we might ask about knowledge is:

question #3: How do the various things that I know fit together? That is, what is the *architecture* or *structure* of my knowledge?

Much of our knowledge depends on other knowledge. For example:

I know that PHIL 159 meets in Emerson 305.
How do I know that? Because I know that the online course catalog says that PHIL 159 meets in Emerson 305.
How do I know that? Because I know that, when I checked the online course catalogue this morning, it said that PHIL 159 meets in Emerson 305.
How do I know that? [. . . and so on . . .]

Consider such a chain of knowledge. There seem to be three salient options:

- *infinitism*: The chain goes on forever.
- *coherentism*: The chain eventually loops back on itself.
- *foundationalism*: The chain ends in a piece of knowledge that doesn't depend on any other knowledge.

VI. The Limits of Knowledge

A more worrisome question we can ask about knowledge is:

question #4: Do I really know the things listed in (a) through (k)? That is, what are the *limits* of my knowledge?

A *skeptic* is someone who doubts that we have knowledge of a certain sort. For example, consider the following well-known scenario as described by Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam:

> ". . . imagine that a human being (you can imagine this to be yourself) has been subjected to an operation by an evil scientist. The person's brain (your brain) has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients which keeps the brain alive. The nerve endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal. There seem to be people, objects, the sky, etc.; but really all the person (you) is experiencing is the result of electronic impulses traveling from the computer to the nerve endings. The computer is so clever that if the person tries to raise his hand, the feedback from the computer will cause him to 'see' and 'feel' the hand being raised. Moreover, by varying the program, the evil scientist can cause the victim to 'experience' (or hallucinate) any situation or environment the scientist wishes. He can also obliterate the memory of the brain operation, so that the victim will seem to himself to have always been in this environment. It can even seem to the victim that he is sitting and reading these very words . . . ." ("Brains in a Vat," in *Reason, Truth, and History*, pp. 5–6)

Here is a (fairly crude) skeptical argument for the conclusion that we don't have any knowledge of type (b):

skeptical argument #1:

1. I don't know *that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat*.
2. If I don't know *that I'm not a brain-in-a-vat*, then I don't know *that I'm in a classroom right now*.
3. So, I don't know *that I'm in a classroom right now*.

Some skeptical arguments don't depend on such fantastical possibilities. For example, here is a skeptical argument that would undermine the example I gave of knowledge of type (c):

skeptical argument #2:

1. I don't know *that it isn't the case that someone broke into my office a few minutes ago and stole the computer that was in there*.
2. If I know *that there's a computer sitting on my desk in my office right now*, then I know *that it isn't the case that someone broke into my office a few minutes ago and stole the computer that was in there.*
3. So, I don't know *that there's a computer sitting on my desk in my office right now*.

Finally, some skeptical arguments don't depend on considering any sort of skeptical scenario at all. For example, here is a skeptical argument for the conclusion that we can't know anything at all:

skeptical argument #3:

1. If I know that *p*, then either
    a. that knowledge depends on an infinite chain of other pieces of knowledge,
    b. that knowledge depends on a chain of knowledge that eventually loops back on itself,

    or

    c. that piece of knowledge depends on a chain of knowledge that eventually terminates in a piece of knowledge that doesn't depend on any other knowledge.
2. Knowledge can't depend on an infinite chain of other pieces of knowledge.
3. Knowledge can't depend on a chain of knowledge that eventually loops back on itself.
4. There is no such thing as a piece of knowledge that doesn't depend on any other knowledge.
5. So, I don't know that *p*.

Many contemporary philosophers seem to think of the skeptic as this annoying guy or gal in the corner whom we must attempt to shut up (or, if that fails, can choose to ignore). However, I like to think of the skeptic *as a part of ourselves* when we are at our most reflective about the true basis for our knowledge.

Some skeptical arguments are clearly fallacious. But other skeptical arguments are vexing puzzles that reveal deep insights about us and our cognitive place in the world.

VII. The Value of Knowledge

A final question we can ask about knowledge, which we will only briefly touch on in this course, is:

question #5: Why should we care about whether we know something? That is, what is the *value* or *importance* of knowledge?

VIII. Other Epistemological Questions

These sorts of questions ramify. For example, if we take *justification* to be necessary for *knowledge*, then we can ask parallel questions about justification:

question #1a: What *conditions* must be satisfied for a belief of mine to count as justified?

question #2a: What is the *source* of the justification that I have for various beliefs?

question #3a: What is *structure* of my justified beliefs?

question #4a: What are the *limits* to the justification that I can have for various beliefs?

question #5a: What is the *value* of having justified beliefs?