Course Introduction: Epistemology

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University of Washington

Phil. 450
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Icebreakers!

Partner Introductions

Directions: Turn to a neighbor.

- Introduce yourselves *quietly*.
- Discuss something each of you have discovered over the last year that you like. That could be an activity (yoga), a book, movie, song, television show, etc.
- Finally, discuss the following questions:
  1. Name something that humans know a lot about even though it is not directly perceivable or observable.
  2. Name something that humans **cannot** know a lot about, and then explain why.
  3. Lots of philosophical questions are of the form "What is X?" For instance, political philosophers might ask the question "What is justice?" In this class, we will discuss the question "What is knowledge?" What types of methods should one use to investigate those questions? What methods have you used to answer philosophical questions in previous classes?

Group Introductions

Directions: Form a group with four students. Introduce your partner to the other two students in your group.

The Syllabus Game!

Instructor Information

Instructor:	Conor Mayo-Wilson
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Course Websites:	

https://faculty.washington.edu/conormw/Teaching/
https://canvas.uw.edu/

Course Description

What is knowledge, and what do we know? Those are the two central questions of our course, and consequently, the course is divided into two parts. First, we will study reliabilist theories of knowledge, and we will compare and contrast those theories with mathematical criteria that are often used to assess the reliability of statistical methods in the sciences. Second, we will apply reliabilist theories to empirical and non-empirical knowledge respectively. That is, we first use reliabilist theories to assess what can be known via observation and experience, i.e., what can be known empirically. Then we investigate whether reliabilist theories can shed light on mathematical and moral knowledge, which are paradigmatic examples of a priori/non-empirical knowledge.

Course Goals

By the end of the quarter, students should be able to

1. Summarize at least two different theories of propositional knowledge, and explain in what sense the theories capture the intuition that knowledge is incompatible with luck.
2. Apply those theories of knowledge to respond to various types of skeptical arguments, including versions of external world skepticism, inductive skepticism, and mathematical and/or moral skepticism.
3. Construct rigorous arguments about knowledge, evidence, and justified belief, and communicate those arguments precisely and succinctly in speech and in writing.

Assignments/Requirements

There are three types of assignments:

- Reading assignments,
- End-of-class writing assignments, and
- Two papers.

Reading assignments and end-of-class writing assignments are graded for **completion**. Only papers are graded on **content**.

Reading Assignment Guidelines

1. I will typically ask you to answer three to five questions, but my reading assignments often contain eight to twelve questions, sometimes more. The additional questions are optional, but they often concern important parts of the readings that we will discuss in class. Thus, you are required to write down the page numbers on which the authors address the question so that you can find the appropriate passages quickly (i) in class and (ii) when you are writing papers for the course. If there are no page numbers (e.g., because I ask you to read parts of a webpage), please indicate the **section number** in which the question is addressed.
2. **For all questions on the assignment**, remember to provide page numbers indicating which pages in the text you believe address the question. Include page numbers even if you are paraphrasing a section.

Reading Assignment Guidelines

1. Bring **typed** copies of your reading assignments to class.
2. Write in complete, English sentences.
3. Always answer questions **in your own words**. Do not quote unless you explain a quote.
4. Your answers need never be more than two paragraphs. Often, answers will be one or two sentences.
5. To reiterate: In response to **all** questions (including both required and optional questions), list the **page numbers** on which the question is answered.

Example Reading Assignment

For instance, your responses to RA3 might look like the following. RA3 requires you to answer questions two and three, but questions 1 and 4 are optional.

1. P. 6.
2. According to Goldman's theory of knowledge, Smith does not know that "the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket" because Smith believes that Jones will get the job (p. 12)
3. Yes, according to Goldman's theory, in order for you to know that a proposition P is true, whatever made P true must be a cause of your belief (p. 14). For instance, if you know that Suzy kissed Billy, your belief must be an effect of Suzy having kissed Billy.
4. P. 17.
5. Etc.

Note: All of the above answers are incorrect but they show the structure of a reading assignment.

Your first reading assignment (RA3) is due next Monday (January 12th).

No reading assignments are due in the first week of class. They are provided simply to help you read the material.

End-of-Class Questions Guidelines

- 10 minutes of "free writing" to collect your thoughts and to practice writing.
- Write on the back of your reading assignments.

Papers

- Paper 1 (5-7 pages): Defend a condition(s) that is purportedly necessary or sufficient for knowledge.
- Paper 2 (6-8 pages): Reconstruct and critique a skeptical argument.

Course overview

Today's Question: Give one reason that philosophers have thought a **theory** of knowledge is **not** simply a definition of the word "knowledge".

Types of knowledge

Philosophers often distinguish

- Propositional knowledge,
  - E.g., Conor knows *that* one is not permitted to eat in a classroom this quarter.
- Know-How
  - E.g., Conor does not know *how* to be subtle.
- Personal or objective knowledge
  - E.g., Conor knows Stephanie. Conor knows Seattle.

Theories of Knowledge

For the next two weeks, we'll discuss **theories** of propositional knowledge.

- Sometimes philosophers use the phrase an **analysis of knowledge** instead.

Question: What does "theory of knowledge" mean?

Theories vs. Definitions of Knowledge

Bad Answer 1: A theory of knowledge is a detailed **definition**, i.e., it's an in-depth description of when English-speakers use the word "know."

Problem:

- That answer confuses knowledge with the word "knowledge."
- Philosophers are interested in the *thing* that is called "knowledge" in English, "Wissen" in German, "conocimiento" in Spanish, etc. in 6000+ spoken languages.

Theories vs. Definitions of Knowledge

Bad Answer 2: A theory of knowledge is a description of when people use the word "know", its synonyms, or its translations.

Problems:

- That still confuses words with what is **meant** by those words.
- By analogy, a theory of heat is not a theory about when English speakers use the word "heat", nor about when Spanish speakers use the word "calor."
- A theory of heat is about the thing **denoted** by the word "heat."

Objection: But Conor, heat is something physical. We can feel it, measure it, etc.. But we cannot see, feel, taste, etc. knowledge. If there is nothing more that we can do to study what "knowledge" refers other than investigate cases in which we're inclined to use the word "know", then a theory of knowledge is simply a complicated definition or description of linguistic practice.

Response: That objection conflates at least four different claims, namely,

1. X is physical,
2. X is measurable,
3. X is directly perceivable via our senses,
4. Facts about X are really just facts about the the way we use the word "X."

Let's distinguish the first, second, and third claims first.

Measurable vs. Physical vs. Perceivable

- There are physical things that we cannot measure now and might in principle be unmeasurable (e.g., very distant parts of the universe),
- Many things that are measurable are not directly perceivable (e.g., small microscopic objects that lack a smell, taste, etc.)
  - Knowledge may be one of those things. After all, your education system is premised on the idea that we can crudely and indirectly measure knowledge via tests, papers, and various assignments!

More importantly, let's now distinguish the first and fourth claims below:

1. X is physical,
2. X is directly perceivable via our senses,
3. X is measurable,
4. Facts that are purportedly about X are really just facts about the the way we use the word "X."

Facts about non-material objects

It's controversial, but most philosophers (and most students) believe there are facts about non-physical objects.

Examples:

- **Mathematical objects** (e.g., numbers, vector spaces, etc.) do not seem to be physical (e.g., what region of space does the number two occupy?). Nonetheless, there are objective facts about $2^{2^{80}}$ (e.g., that it's even) even though that number exceeds what is believed to be the number of atoms in the universe.
- **Social kinds** such as dictatorships do not seem to be physical. But we often think there are objective facts about monarchy (e.g., that they're unjust, or unstable in the presence of neighboring democratic regimes).

Objection: Conor, I still think facts about numbers and social kinds are facts about how we use language or symbols.

- Facts about $2^{2^{80}}$ are facts about how we use mathematical symbols, for instance. Sure, those facts are complicated because we have complex relations between our various symbols. But they're still facts about symbols.
- Similar remarks apply to the way we use the words "dictatorship" in relation to other governmental, economic, etc. terms.

Responses: I am sympathetic to the claim about mathematics, actually. But there are well-known problems with this response (e.g., if two is a symbol, is it this occurrence of "2" or this one "2", or "two", etc.?). However, when thinking about knowledge there's a deeper problem with the objection ...

Theories vs. Definitions of Knowledge

Big problem: People use the word "knows" (and its translations) in inconsistent ways.

- Thus, even when philosophers use linguistic evidence, they will try to reconcile contradictory judgments about knowledge.
- But there's no reason to reconcile contradictions if you're simply interested in describing linguistic practice. It'd be fine to say, "here are the myriad of inconsistent ways in which the word 'knows' is used."
- Why reconcile contradictions? Because "knowledge" is a **normative** term ...

Descriptive and Normative Theories

Descriptive Claims: Assert something is, was, or will be the case.

- Typical descriptive Terms: Heavy. long, red, building, tree, etc.

Normative Claims: Assert something should be or should have been the case.

- **Evaluative Claims:** Something is good, bad, right, wrong.
- **Prescriptive Claims:** One ought to do X or to avoid Y.
- Typical Normative terms: Good, bad, right, wrong, justified, rationality, obligation, permission, etc.

Knowledge as a normative term

- Many English words are normative but might not seem so on first glance. "Knowledge" and "health" are two prime examples.
- The following sentences sound odd. That suggests that "knows" is normative:
  - Bri knows that the movie is at 3PM, but she should believe it's at 4PM.
  - Stella knows that the desk is movable, but her belief is unjustified.
  - Scientists know that geocentrism is false, but you're permitted to believe what you want.
- Typically, if S knows that p, then S **should** believe p. One who knows p might be permitted, in some moral or legal sense, to believe p is false. But one who knows p is typically assumed to have **good evidence** for p.

Methodology

Question: But how should we learn about what people **should** believe?

Answer:

- That's a really good question, which I can't answer.
- Traditionally, philosophers have relied heavily on thought experiments and arguments from seemingly self-evident principles (akin to early axiomatic mathematics?). We'll do the same in our class, even though I'm ambivalent about whether this methodology is any good.

Course Outline

Course Structure

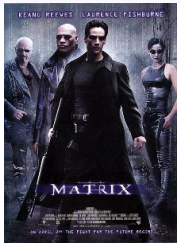
Course Outline:

1. Weeks 1-3: Propositional Knowledge
2. Weeks 4-6: Critiquing Inductive Skepticism
3. Week 8-10: Mathematical and Moral Skepticism

Skepticism

- For any subject X, philosophers use the phrase "X skepticism" to denote the thesis that we cannot know facts about X.
- **Example:** "Moral skepticism" is the view that moral facts are unknowable.
- Typically, philosophers who discuss X-skepticism assume there are facts about X (e.g., that there are moral facts).

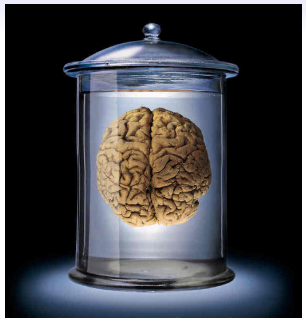
Radical, External World Skepticism



I will typically talk about brains in vats (BIVs), but you can pick your favorite story that might be used to doubt all of your experiences, such as

- You're the victim of an evil demon,
- You're in the Matrix.
- You're part of a massive computer simulation.

Simple Skeptical Argument



- **Premise 1:** I don't know that I am not a BIV.
- **Premise 2:** If I don't know that I am not a BIV, then I don't know I have hands.
- **Conclusion:** I don't know I have hands.
  - Again, you can replace "I have hands" with virtually any number of other mundane things that you believe you know.

There are many analogs of the simple skeptical argument . . .

Hume's Skeptical Argument

- **Premise 1:** I don't know that the laws of physics won't change tonight.
- **Premise 2:** If I don't know that the laws of physics won't change tonight, then I don't know the sun will rise tomorrow.
- **Conclusion:** I don't know the sun will rise tomorrow.
  - Again, you can replace "the sun will rise tomorrow" with virtually any number of other mundane things about parts of space and time that have yet to be observed.

Responding to the Simple Skeptical Argument

No matter the version of the simple skeptical argument, you have three options.

- Reject P1.
- Reject P2.
- Maintain the argument is invalid (i.e., that the conclusion does not follow from the premises).

Options

Philosophers have taken all three options.

- "Neo-Mooreans" reject P1 but often endorse P2.
- Philosophers who reject "epistemic closure" reject P2. They typically endorse P1.
- Contextualists deny that the argument is valid because it equivocates on the meaning of the word "knows." However, they maintain both premises are true, when the word "know" is interpreted differently in the two premises.