PHIL410
Basic Terminology
updated: 1/12/12

Epistemology: from (G) *episteme* and *logos* (knowledge; word, account). The theory and study of knowledge.

- What is the thing we are to study in the course?
- Knowledge and knowledge claims are ubiquitous in human affairs. (I know my name; I know some philosophy; I know that 2 + 2 = 4.)
- However, clear understanding of this phenomenon is elusive, to say the least.
- It is not clear, for one thing, what is the genus of knowledge.
    - It may be a state in a cognitive agent.
    - It may be a disposition to act in certain ways.
    - It may be a relation between the cognitive agent and a fact, or truth, or true proposition
- Knowledge is generally thought to entail truth. If I know that *P*, then *P* must be true. 'False knowledge' is a misnomer; read 'false belief'.

Representation, Reality, and Correspondence

- A standard model for knowledge involves two things and a certain relation between them.
    - Reality: mind-independent states of affairs
    - Representation: a "mental state" depicting (re-presenting to the conscious mind) some mind-independent state of affairs
    - Correspondence: a "match" or "agreement" or "isomorphism" between reality and representation. When this occurs, we have "truth"; absent, various degrees of error or falsehood.
- The Correspondence model suffers from vagueness and possibly incoherence (as regards the meaning of "match") as well as from metaphysical obscurity (how, exactly, is representation "about" something else? how does the mind approach or connect with that which is "mind-independent"?).
- However, the concepts of representation and reality and of a relation between them dominate discussion of contemporary epistemology. (The above definitions are admittedly vague; precise, defensible definitions are controversial and in any case a goal of epistemology.)

Skepticism

- Skepticism comprises a host of doctrines denying knowledge.
- Universal skepticism denies the existence of any knowledge whatsoever.
- Lesser forms of skepticism deny the existence of certain forms of knowledge – such as knowledge of the empirical world; knowledge of moral truth; knowledge of mathematical truth; etc.
- Whether one endorses a form of skepticism may depend on one's view of the relation between "common" and "strict" notions of knowledge. Knowledge in the "loose and popular sense" may permit my claiming to know that the sun is a burning ball of gas and that I have 10 toes. Knowledge in the "strict and

philosophical sense" may raise the standards for knowledge to where I cannot defend these claims.

- The *criteria* of knowledge – or, equally, of knowledge justification – are in other words a central issue in epistemology.
- A high standard for knowledge is *certainty*. And while much talk of knowledge seems to imply that to know is to be incapable of being mistaken, relatively few philosophers accept this criterion. Specifying less strict conditions for knowledge proves to be difficult and contentious. (Much of contemporary analytic debate centers on this issue.)
- In any case, most philosophers agree that any interesting account of knowledge must avoid significant forms of skepticism, since it is our standard knowledge practices that we want to analyze and understand. (It is crucial, then, to be able to show that one's theory of knowledge captures our actual knowledge practices, and explains them clearly.) (Hume, however, defends his skepticism with a thorough revision of our ordinary knowledge practices.)

Justified, true belief

- This is a standard analysis of knowledge (in contemporary analytic literature).
- Knowledge involves a belief (e.g., that 2 + 2 = 4), which is true, and which one is justified in believing (e.g., by "self-evidence").
- Justification: i.e., some more or less reliable "connection" between the believing agent and the agent's belief being true. If one happens simply to believe a proposition without any justification, then we typically deny knowledge. Knowledge, in other words, requires "good reason" for thinking one's belief true.
- *Infallibilism*: if a belief turns out to be false, then one cannot be said to have known the proposition in question to be true. (BonJour will advance a *fallibilist* account of *a priori* knowledge.)
- *Internalism*: on this view, one has ready, introspective access to the justification for one's knowledge claim – e.g., a conscious sensory state.
- *Externalism*: on this view, the conditions making one's belief true may not be immediately accessible by the knowledge claimant – e.g., where knowledge depends on the proper functioning of certain organs.

Empirical Knowledge

- Perhaps the central issue in epistemology concerns the nature of empirical knowledge.
- The term 'empirical' means based on, or confirmed by, or deriving from sensory observation (either with or without instrumental augmentation). In other words, knowledge conveyed by the senses (roughly).
- Empirical knowledge is typically distinguished from "pure rational" or "logical" forms of knowing.
- The terms '*a posteriori*' and '*a priori*' refer to the same distinction: posterior to (after) acquiring sense information, vs. prior to (or independent of) any particular sensory "input".
- One major issue here is simply to describe in detail the means by which empirical knowledge is acquired. This involves complex perceptual and nervous systems, the physical nature of light, sound, odor, etc., as well as subtle conceptual and linguistic phenomena. It is well known, for instance, that the phenomenal aspect

of color is not identical with the physical structure reflecting light of a certain wavelength. What, exactly, do we know on the basis of sensation? More difficult issues concern the relationship between the experiencing *person* and his/her experiences; the distinction between that experiencer and his/her environment; the means by which experience itself is possible; etc.

- Another set of issues concerns the relationship between *a priori* and *a posteriori* forms of thought: do we in fact possess both, or is one a form of the other? Do ideas originate in sensation alone, or was Plato right in asserting their eternity?
- Our main concern will be in trying to identify as clearly as possible the relationships between "knower" and "known", in this arena.

A Priori Knowledge

- A second important debate in philosophy concerns the status of the *a priori*. Recently, a trend towards radical empiricism has been reversed and defenses of *a priori* knowledge have gained greater acceptance.
- See BonJour v. Quine.
- Part of the question here is whether deductive-type inference is a form of *a priori* knowledge.

Sense and Reason

- Evidently, humans have a variety of mental capacities, including that for sensation and that for reasoning. Of the two, sensation seems the simpler system (in phenomenal terms), while "reasoning" may refer to multiple operations, including deduction, abstraction, conceptual synthesis, etc. Neither function, however, is well-understood.
- (Other mental capacities include memory, emotion, desire, volition (willing), imagination, etc.)
- Sensation may be distinguished from *sense perception*. Strictly speaking, 'sensation' refers to the felt product of some sense organ, such as pain, the color red, a high-pitched whine, etc. Sense *perception*, by contrast, includes sensation along with some conceptual activity, an "identification" of the sensed. Thus, identifying a particular sensation *as pain*, or *as a high-pitched whine* involves the application of a concept to the sensory manifold, arguably. The result of this concept application is a determination of some particular element of one's overall sense for attention or consideration.
- The term 'reason' is applied to various mental operations, including understanding, conception, deduction, judgment, etc. Some theorists attempt to parse use of these terms more strictly, so that 'reason' may apply only to a certain process (or processes) of ratiocination (deduction; logical inference; conceptual analysis). For example, inferring from 'X is a brown cow' that 'X is brown'. "Understanding", then, involves recognition of a "match" between certain concepts and certain sensations (as, for example, when I recognize that a certain sensation satisfies my concept of *brown*). "Conception" then would be the capacity for the formation of concepts. "Judgment" or "cognition" involves a synthesis of concepts, as for example when I judge that a certain cow that I see is brown, resulting in the "perception" of a brown cow. (This specification of terminology is broadly Kantian.)

- Important epistemological issues in this vicinity include the following: How does a concept "match up" with a sensation? Where do concepts come from? What can we come to know by use of the faculties of sense and reason?

Empiricism and Rationalism (see also http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism/)

- Empiricists and rationalists differ on the question of the primary source of knowledge. Empiricists maintain that all knowledge derives ultimately from sensation. Rationalists maintain that some forms or items of knowledge derive not from sensation but from reason (understood broadly).
- Empiricists do not generally deny the existence or value of reason. Most agree that the process by which we derive 25 from 5 x 5 is rational and not sensory. The question, however, is where the relevant concepts come from. A strict empiricist must maintain that concepts such as *five* and *multiply* must ultimately derive from sensation, as perhaps does the operation of multiplying itself.
- Neither do rationalists deny the importance of sensation. Obviously, we cannot gain knowledge of the empirical world except by sensation. However, certain forms of knowledge appear impossible to acquire from the senses. In particular, knowledge of universal or necessary truth would seem incapable of derivation from sensation alone. (How could one know from experience alone that the area of every circle must be equal to πr^2? This would arguably require sensory acquaintance with every possible circle.)
- Modern rationalists such as Descartes and Leibniz tend to emphasize the vagueness or unclarity of sensory information, and to play up the precision of the conceptual. Hume, as we shall see, challenges the rationalist to demonstrate that our geometrical and other rational knowledge applies to the empirical world.

Theoretical and Pragmatic (Practical) Knowledge

- An important distinction in kinds of knowledge.
- Very roughly: "knowledge that ___" vs. "knowledge of how to ___".
- Alternatively, "propositional knowledge" is defined as knowledge *that* a particular proposition is true: I know that the proposition '2 + 2 = 4' is true.
- Contrast this with knowledge of how to tie your shoes; how to use a telephone; how to spell your name; etc. This form of knowledge, arguably, does not involve knowledge of the truth of some proposition.
- A significant epistemological issue is whether this distinction is valid. Heidegger, e.g., maintains that all knowledge is ultimately pragmatic: knowing that 2 + 2 = 4 is in effect knowledge of what to do when confronted with the symbols '2 + 2'. On the other hand, Plato held that practical knowledge is a sub-division of theoretical knowledge: practical knowledge is knowledge of certain facts, namely, what is best to do under certain circumstances.
- In general, we can say that where the goal is *truth* knowledge purports to be theoretical, and that where the goal is *benefit* or *welfare*, knowledge purports to be pragmatical. (Of course, this distinction depends on the meaning of 'truth', which itself is a vexed issue, and which carries the same ambiguity.)
- Our attention will be focused, preliminarily, upon analysis of theoretical knowledge.