

KNOWLEDGE: Skepticism

Lecture 9

Phil 1000, Fall 2008
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Epistemology

- The study of how we know?
 - What are the origins, nature and limits of knowledge?
 - What justifies claims that anyone **knows** something?
 - “S knows that p” versus “S believes that p”
- “Know” versus “Believe”
 - “Knowledge” denotes a privileged epistemic state, associated with certainty or indubitability.
 - “Believe” denotes something less than knowledge.

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Sources & Types of Knowledge

- Sources:
 - Perception*, memory, introspection, testimony, and reason.
- Types:
 - Factual, Moral, Aesthetic, Mathematical, Temporal (past, present, future), etc.
- Some distinctions:
 - Know of Acquaintance: I know Charlotte. I know Italy.
 - Know-how: I know Karate. I know cooking.
 - Propositional Knowledge: I know that p...

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Justified True Belief (JTB)

- Belief = cognitive state, representing world.
- Justified = adequate support to accept that belief.
- True = belief accurately represents the world.

Knowledge consists in having a belief (p) about the world that is true and in which you are justified in accepting as true.

- If I am justified in accepting a belief (p) that turns out to be false, I can't be said to have known (p): **Mistaken**.
- If I accept a belief (p), without adequate justification, and it turns out to be true, I can't be said to have known (p): **Accident**.

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The Skeptic's Challenge

Is knowledge possible?

- Senses are fooled, unreliable:

Perception is the basis for almost all types of knowledge, but our senses often deceive us, they are limited, change under different conditions, change over time/age/mental condition. (Examples)
- Problem of the criterion:

To be confident in our knowledge claims we must know the difference between the way things appear to us and the way things are, between what is reliable and what is not. That is, we need a standard (or criterion). However, in order to be confident in this criterion it must also meet some standard of reliability (another criterion) ...*ad infinitum*.

Appearance vs. Reality

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Unger's Skepticism

P1: If someone *knows* something to be so, then it is all right for that person to be absolutely *certain* that it is so.

P2: It is never all right for anyone to be absolutely *certain* that anything is so.

C: Nobody ever *knows* that anything is so.

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Support for P1

Knowledge entails absolute certainty

- Linguistic evidence
 - Inconsistent: “He knew that it was raining, but he wasn’t absolutely certain that it was.”
 - Substitution: “He knew it” is equivalent to “He knew it for certain.”
- Certainty = Dogmatic Attitude
 - “certain” is an absolute adjective: denoting a limiting state or condition; nothing could be “more” certain; “certain” is superlative.
 - Certainty means: “...if S is certain that p, then it follows that S is *not at all* open to consider any new experience or information as relevant to his thinking in the matter that p.” (p. 145)
 - That is, to be certain that p means there is no possible way that belief p could be wrong/false.

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Support for P2

We can never be absolutely certain about anything; dogmatic attitude is untenable.

- Examples designed to undermine the dogmatic attitude:
 - Ink bottle
 - Artificial stimulation
 - Harder cases
- General Claim: there is always some doubt that can be raised in regard to any claim to knowledge – in order to undermine certainty, thus to undermine possibility of knowledge.

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“Even if the particular experiences one is able to imagine does not seem to jeopardize some statement which seems quite certain, one shouldn’t be *sure* that there isn’t any such sequence – possibly, even one which our human imagination just can’t grasp in advance. And even if there is no sequence of *experience* which ought to make one less certain, *mustn’t* there be some other factor information about which ought to give one pause? ...No matter how comfortable one feels in his philosophy and his view of the world, I can’t see how he might properly be *certain* that there is no way that he could possibly be wrong. He cannot properly be certain that he has given a complete account of every sort of experience, evidence and information which might possibly exist.”

(pp. 149-150)

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Thoughts on Unger’s Argument?

- Does knowledge entail (dogmatic) certainty?
 - What would knowledge be without certainty?
- Should knowledge entail (dogmatic) certainty?
 - What kind of knowledge is worth having?
- (Reflexive objection): How do we know there is always some other information that ought to undermine one’s certainty?
 - That is, does the Unger’s argument lead one to believe that the skeptic knows something? (See previous quote.)

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Summary

- Epistemology
- Sources and types of knowledge
- Traditional Definition of Knowledge = JTB
- Skeptic’s challenge (Is knowledge possible: No.)
 - Perception is unreliable.
 - Problem of the criterion.
 - Dogmatism (Unger)
- Appearance vs. Reality distinction

Next Time: Descartes’ answer to the Skeptic’s Challenge

Think about this: Can you prove you are not dreaming right now?

Can you prove you exist?

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