

Knowledge & Skepticism

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Course Description

This course explores some of the primary questions and issues in epistemology. The aim of these lectures is to familiarize you with some of the problems and debates central to the field and to equip you with the philosophical skills necessary to do more advanced work. The course is divided into four parts and considers four general questions: What is knowledge? What, if anything, do we know? How can we defend our knowledge from skeptical challenges? Why do we have a concept of knowledge at all?

Part 1 - Analyzing Knowledge

We investigate various attempts to analyze the concept of knowledge. What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge? Is knowledge anything more than justified true belief? Are there reasons to doubt that knowledge requires belief, justification, or truth? We will look at Edmund Gettier's highly influential (two-page) article that allegedly refutes the "traditional conception of knowledge," as well as some responses to it. We conclude by reflecting on whether we should give up traditional analyses of knowledge.

READINGS

- Gettier, E. 1963. "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23: 121–23.
- Radford, C. 1966. "Knowledge by Examples." *Analysis* 27: 1–11.
- Goldman, A. 1967. "A Causal Theory of Knowing." *Journal of Philosophy* 64 (12): 357–372.
- Sosa, E. 1964. "The Analysis of 'Knowledge that p'." *Analysis* 25: 1–8.
- Armstrong, D. 1973. *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goldman, A. 1976. "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge." *Journal of Philosophy* 73: 771–91.
- Lehrer, K. and Paxson, T. 1969. "Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief." *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (8): 225–237.

Part 2 - Skeptical Challenges

We investigate skepticism about knowledge. Our main focus is Descartes's formulation of skepticism in his *Meditations*, as well as modern versions of the skeptical challenge. We explore questions such as: Do I know that I am not currently dreaming? Do I know that I am not a brain in a vat? Must I know that I am not a brain in a vat in order to know anything? Can we just reject skepticism as absurd and improbable? We also look at Peter Unger's formulation of skepticism, which argues that knowledge requires certainty, but we can be certain of almost nothing; therefore, we hardly know anything.

READINGS

- Descartes, R. *Meditations*, 1–2.
- Unger, P. 1971. "A Defense of Skepticism." *Philosophical Review* 80: 198–219.
- Hume, D. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part IV, Sect. 2.
- Williams, M. 1999. "Skepticism." In J. Greco and E. Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*.
- Russell, B. 1912. *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, chs. 1–3.
- Williams, B. 1978. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*. Penguin, ch. 2 and appendix 3.
- Stroud, B. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Clarendon Press, esp. ch. 1.

Part 3 - Responses to Skepticism

We explore several responses to the skeptical challenges outlined in Part 2. In particular, we look at four responses: (1) Descartes's Cogito, (2) G. E. Moore's "proof" of an external world, (3) Dretske's denial of epistemic closure, and (4) David Lewis's contextualism. After investigating the virtues and vices of each proposed solution, we conclude by reflecting on whether skepticism is all that bad.

READINGS

Descartes, R. *Meditations*, 2.

Moore, G. E. 1959. "A Defence of Common Sense." In *Philosophical Papers*. Allen & Unwin.

Lewis, D. 1996. "Elusive Knowledge." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (4): 549–567.

Schiffer, S. 1996. "Contextualist Solutions to Skepticism." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 96: 317–333.

Nozick, R. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Clarendon Press, ch. 3, sects. I and II.

Craig, E. 1989. "Nozick and the Skeptic." *Analysis* 49: 161–162.

Part 4 - The Purpose of Knowledge

The course concludes by exploring why we have a concept of knowledge at all. What might life be like without our familiar concept of knowledge? Would this gap in our cognitive economy have profound implications, or would our lives proceed roughly as they have? We reflect on what life might be like without the concept of knowledge in order to better understand whether, and if so why, this concept is important or valuable. We look specifically at Edward Craig's book *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, which offers a new and potentially fruitful way of investigating knowledge.

READINGS

Craig, E. 1990. *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, chs. 1–3 and 10.

Dancy, J. 1992. "Review of *Knowledge and the State of Nature*." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 42 (186): 393–395.

Kappel, K. 2010. "On Saying that Someone Knows: Themes from Craig." In A. Haddock, A. Millar, and D. Pritchard (eds.), *Social Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.

Kelp, C. 2011. "What's the Point of 'Knowledge' Anyway?" *Episteme* 8: 53–66.