

# General Philosophy

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## *Lecture 5: Knowledge and Scepticism*



# From Scepticism to Knowledge

- Sceptical arguments, such as those of Descartes, suggest that we know very little. But we still want to distinguish between things that we consider we have a right to believe (e.g. on the basis of experience or strong testimony), and other less secure beliefs (e.g. “superstitions”).
- If the sceptical arguments can't be answered, then it's tempting to attack the problem by (re-?) defining “knowledge”.

# What is Knowledge?

- “What is X?” questions:
  - X might be “truth”, “perception”, “reason”, “the mind”, “personal identity”, “freedom”, etc.
  - Seen as important in Philosophy since Plato.
- But they are puzzling. Are we asking:
  - “When do we apply the word ‘X’?” *or*
  - “What is a *genuine* case of X?”
- The former seems merely linguistic; the latter – if different – can appear senseless.

# What is Geography?

## ■ “Geography” as a discipline:

- Initially, perhaps, described the study of places in terms of location, physical characteristics, mineral resources, natural flora and fauna etc.
- Then extended to cover land-use, farming, and other economic factors, even culture ...
- Suppose one were now to ask “But is culture *really* part of the discipline of geography?”
- Well, if “geography” as actually used does cover the study of culture, the answer is “Yes!”

# The Concept of Knowledge

- Core *normative* concept, *versus* particular judgements:
  - The concept of “knowledge” plays a central role in distinguishing *reliable* beliefs from others.
  - This makes it *normative*: calling something “knowledge” does more than just categorising it as something we standardly *call* knowledge.
  - Hence it does seem to be possible to ask “Everyone *calls* this knowledge, but is it *really*? ”
  - Compare the response to Strawson on induction: we *call* it reasonable, but is it *really* good evidence?

# Intuitions, Puzzle Cases, and Conceptual Analysis

- Conceptual analysis can involve:
  - Appeal to linguistic “intuitions” (i.e. judgements that we are naturally inclined to make).
  - Puzzle cases (“intuition pumps”) that can put pressure on those intuitions.
  - Argument, in which we draw out implications of these plausible judgements and principles.
  - Systematisation, in which we try to clarify the concept coherently in the light of all this.

# Three Kinds of Knowledge

## ■ Acquaintance

- “I know Oxford”, “Do you know John Smith?”.

## ■ Knowing How

- “I know how to drive”, “Do you know how to open this?”

## ■ *Knowing That*, or *Propositional Knowledge*

- “I know *that* this building is the Exam Schools”,  
“Do you know *that* it will rain?”
- Where  $P$  is the proposition concerned, this is often referred to as “Knowledge that  $P$ ”.

# The Traditional Analysis of Knowledge that $P$

- A subject (i.e. a person)  $S$  knows that  $P$  if, and only if:
  - $P$  is true
  - $S$  believes that  $P$
  - $S$  is justified in believing that  $P$
- A.J. Ayer gives the last two conditions as:
  - $S$  is sure that  $P$  is true
  - $S$  has the right to be sure that  $P$  is true

# *P* is true

- If *S* knows that *P*, does it follow that *P* must be *true*? Distinguish two claims:
  - *S* knows that *P* → *P* is necessarily true  
false: I know that I exist, but it doesn't follow that I exist necessarily.
  - Necessarily ( *S* knows that *P* → *P* is true )  
convincing: We wouldn't allow *S*'s belief that *P* to be counted as a case of *knowledge* unless the belief is, in fact, *true*. So it is a necessary truth that anything known is true.

# Complications?

## ■ Knowing Falsehoods?

- “I know that France is hexagonal”

In a sense this can be considered true, because France is *roughly* hexagonal, but in that same sense, it is also true that France is hexagonal.

## ■ An Abomination

- *Never* confuse “ $P$  is true” with “ $P$  is believed to be true”. *Don’t* say “ $P$  is true for me, but  $P$  is false for him” when what you mean is simply “I believe  $P$ , but he does not”. It was never true than the Sun orbits the Earth, even when everyone thought so!

# *S believes that P*

■ If *S* knows that *P*, does it follow that *S* believes that *P*? Not so clear:

– Reliable guessing

Suppose that I am not aware of knowing anything about some topic, but my “guesses” in a quiz are always accurate. I might be reported as *knowing P*, even though I don’t believe *P*.

– Blindsight

Someone with blindsight has no conscious visual awareness, but can “guess” fairly reliably when asked to point towards objects.

# Knowing that One Knows

- Suppose that knowledge must always be “conscious”. Then if I know that  $P$ , will it follow that I must know that *I know that P*?
  - The principle is tempting, but we can iterate ...
    - I know that  $P$
    - I know that *I know that P*
    - I know that *I know that I know that P*
    - I know that *I know that I know that I know that P* ...
  - It is clearly impossible to have conscious belief in all of this infinite sequence.

# *S* is justified in believing that *P*

- Perhaps the central role of the concept of knowledge is to distinguish between beliefs that are “secure” and those that aren’t.
- So what makes the difference between:
  - *believing* that *P* (where *P* happens to be true)
  - *knowing* that *P*?
- “Surely”, if a belief that *P* is to count as a case of *knowledge*, it must be a *justified* belief: one must have *the right* to believe it.

# The Regress of Justification

- Suppose that I believe that  $P$ , and this belief is to be justified. Its justification will typically involve other beliefs. But then if  $P$  is to be justified, these other beliefs must be justified too, and so on ... ?
- How to prevent an infinite regress? We could take the whole web of interlocking beliefs as mutually justifying in some way (*coherentism*), or else some beliefs must be justified in a way that does not depend on any other belief. Descartes was a *foundationalist*, taking some beliefs to be totally secure. A more modern approach is *externalism*.

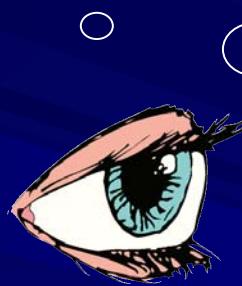
# Internalism and Externalism

- An *internalist* account of justification requires all relevant factors to be *cognitively accessible* to S. We'll see that this faces difficulties ...
- An *externalist* account (e.g. Armstrong, Goldman) allows that some factors relevant to judging S's justification (for belief that *P*) can be *inaccessible* to S; or *external* to S's cognitive perspective.
- So justification could be a matter of a *reliable* causal link between facts and beliefs. I might know that *P* (because my belief reliably depends on *P*'s truth) without knowing how I know.

# Gettier Cases

- Suppose that:
  - $S$  is justified in believing that  $P$ .
  - $P$  clearly implies  $Q$ .
- Does it follow that  $S$ , after inferring  $Q$  from  $P$ , is justified in believing that  $Q$ ?
- On internalist interpretations of “justified”, this does seem to follow. But it leads to so-called “Gettier counterexamples” to the traditional analysis of knowledge.

# A Gettier-style Counterexample



*"There's an oasis  
over there"*



*Mirage*



*Real Oasis  
(out of sight)*

- S's belief is true, and apparently justified, since he infers it from the (apparently justified) belief that he can see an oasis. But we would not say he *knew* that there's an oasis there.

# “No Dependence on False Beliefs”

- Should we add a fourth condition? For example, S knows that  $P$  if, and only if:
  - $P$  is true
  - S believes that  $P$
  - S is justified in believing that  $P$  ...
  - ... in a way that doesn't depend on any falsehood
- But this seems too strong. If you tell me “there were exactly 78 people there”, but you slightly miscounted (in fact there were 77), can't I know that there were more than 40 people there, even though I've inferred this from a falsehood?

# The Lottery Paradox

- Another approach would be to understand justification as involving *very high probability* of truth (given the evidence available to  $S$ ).
- But then consider a billion-ticket lottery:
  - I believe that ticket 000000000 won't win
  - I believe that ticket 000000001 won't win
  - ...
  - I believe that ticket 999999999 won't win
- Each of these is extremely probable, but we're reluctant to call any of them "knowledge". So it seems that no probability threshold will do.

# Non-Accidental Truth

- To deal with the lottery paradox, it's plausible to count a belief as *knowledge* only if it's not an *accident* – not a “mere” matter of chance (of whatever numerical degree) – that it's true.
- But how do we pin this down?
  - Is it mere “chance” that my corroding speedometer is still sufficiently reliable to provide an accurate reading (when perhaps in a month's time it won't be)?
  - Suppose I very occasionally hallucinate that  $P$ , is it “chance” that my current perceptual belief that  $P$  is not an hallucination?

# Contextualism

- Yet another problem, especially pressing for an “internalist” account of knowledge, is that sometimes our criteria can vary.
  - “I know that the train leaves at 17:36” (because I always take that train).
  - “But do you really *know* that it does? It really is essential that I make that appointment.”
  - “OK, I’ll check on the Web to make sure. Then I’ll know.”
- This suggests that the “hurdle” for what counts as adequate justification can vary.

# The Role(s) of the Concept of Knowledge

- Consider the contrast between:
  - “Does she know that her husband is cheating on her?”
    - which could just mean “Does she believe that he’s cheating on her, as we all do?”
  - “Do you know that her husband is cheating on her?”
    - which is more likely to mean “Is it genuinely the case?”, rather than an epistemological enquiry.

# Is “Knowledge” a Genuine Category?

- It is very unusual, in ordinary life, to ask “Does *S* know that *P*” in a situation where:
  - We are totally confident that *S* believes that *P*;  
*and*
  - We are totally confident that *P* is true.
- This might suggest that it’s a mistake to search for some single consistent account of what “knowledge” is, which can deal with all the contexts in which it is applied.
- But we can still ask whether *P* is true ...

# Back to G.E. Moore's Hands

- If we agree with Moore, then we may see externalism about knowledge and justification as a way of reconciling his claim that we know this is a hand, with the sceptical arguments that seem to show that we can't know that we know.
- An externalist can say to the sceptic:  
“I can't prove to you that I know this is a hand, or that my belief is justified, but nevertheless I claim that I do know it, and it is justified.”

# Externalism and Scepticism

- Suppose we accept an externalist account of justification. So *if*, say, my perceptual beliefs are, *in fact*, caused by a reliable causal process, *then* I do in fact know that this table is in front of me.
- But of course the sceptic can still ask: “How do I *know* – or if you prefer, *what right do I have to be at all confident* – that my beliefs are in fact so caused?” Externalism does not exclude sceptical doubt “from the inside”.

# Putnam's Semantic Externalism

- The sceptic claims “I might be a brain in a vat (BIV), so this hand might be just part of the image created artificially.”
- But what do I mean by “hand”? According to Putnam, meanings aren’t purely mental.
- If I am a BIV, then my word “hand” actually means a “hand-in-the-image” ...
- ... in which case this is genuinely a “hand”, because it is a hand-in-the-image.

# Sceptical Responses (1)

- Is the meaning of “hand” just determined by what we’re actually referring to when we think we’re pointing to a real hand?
- Or do we have some further idea of the kind of thing that a hand really is?
- Can we thus make sense of the possibility of a “God’s eye view” (unavailable to us), from which it would be clear that it is all a clever simulation, rather than involving a real entity something like what we take a hand to be?

## (2) Post-Linguistic Envatting

- Suppose that I am “envatted” after I have become linguistically competent.
- So then my word “hand” has already established its “outside vat” meaning.
- It seems to follow that when I later say “this is a hand” from within the vat, I can manage to mean a real hand rather than a mere “hand-in-the-image”. If so, I can raise the question as to whether this really is a hand.

# Back to Induction

- With vertical scepticism (evil demon, BIV, *The Matrix* etc.), it's tempting to ask in a semantic externalist spirit: "Why should I care if it's all an illusion? I'm quite happy to continue with 'life as I experience it' either way."
- But Hume's "problem of induction", as a form of horizontal scepticism, evades this response: whether the world I experience is real or not, I still have the problem of inferring from past to future, from "observed" to "not yet observed".

# The Ethics of Belief

- Hume avoids indiscriminate scepticism by rejecting Descartes' "ethics of belief" – the view that we should withhold assent to anything that's not known with total certainty.
- Hume sees belief as typically involuntary, so withholding assent isn't even an option.
- Note that epistemological externalism also involves a similar rejection.
- We seem to be forced to accept this, if we are to hold out against the sceptic.