Knowledge and the Concept of Mind

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Course Description

What is knowledge? According to the standard story, the answer accepted for millennia—that knowledge is justified true belief—was proven wrong, in 1963, by a simple but devastating argument in a short paper by Edmund Gettier. So began the hunt for the fabled "fourth condition": to be knowledge, a state must be a belief, it must be true, and it must be justified; but it must also apparently be something else. The problem is to say precisely what else it must be. The central task of epistemology ("the theory of knowledge") thus became that of solving for x in the equation "knowledge = belief + truth + justification + x."

Whatever other problems it faces (and there are many), the algebraic approach to epistemology assumes that knowledge can be understood *in terms of* belief, truth, and some third concept. It thus assumes that these concepts are prior to, and independent of, the concept of knowledge. But what if knowledge is actually prior to one (or more) of these concepts? In particular, what if it were prior to the concept of belief? Or what if, perhaps more plausibly, knowledge and belief could only be understood together? What if, contrary to the assumption of most recent epistemology, knowledge is not a kind of belief at all?

We will examine the prospects for sharpening and then pressing these questions, finding resources in a different, somewhat marginalized, and often misunderstood tradition in epistemology, a tradition that was born in Aristotle, came to maturity in Kant, and is survived, in contemporary philosophy, through Wilfrid Sellars, by philosophers like John McDowell and Sebastian Rödl. We will see that a different conception of the relation between knowledge and belief—one which is at least implicit in the writings of Kant and Sellars and their followers—holds out the promise, at least, of an epistemology which, by placing the concept of knowledge at the center of the philosophy of mind, finds a way to place it also where one might have expected it to belong: at the center of epistemology.

Course Goals

As a small, upper-level tutorial, this course provides students with a rare opportunity to pursue the topics of the course in great depth, through continuous discussion with their peers and through frequent and substantial feedback from the instructor on written work. The central goal of the course is thus for each student to explore his or her own reactions to the readings, lectures, and discussions in a manner guided throughout by both verbal and written interaction with the instructor.

A secondary—but not at all unimportant—aim of the course is to provide students with a sense of the history and present landscape of analytic epistemology, while at the same time making clear that the discipline still faces a whole host of unsolved problems, and thus that we live in exciting times for anyone interested in understanding the nature of human knowledge.

By the end of the course, students will be able to explain what is at stake in the debate between epistemological internalists and epistemological externalists, and to identify assumptions common to these two positions as standardly understood. They will be able to provide a critical account of various attempts to analyze the concept of knowledge in terms of other concepts (like belief, justification, and reliability), and will be able to explain the role which various modal concepts (such as luck, safety, and sensitivity) might play in providing an account of the concept and nature of knowledge. Finally, students will be able to state and evaluate some concrete reasons for doubting that the concept of knowledge can by analyzed in terms of any of the concepts that have been employed in analytic epistemology. Students will also be given a glimpse of what an alternative approach to epistemology might look like, though they will not be expected to be able to describe any such approach in detail.

Requirements

Participation

Class discussion will be a central component of our work together this quarter. Good discussions are the fruit of careful reading: if you put in the work to read and digest the material (which might require re-reading), our discussions will be rewarding. If you fail to do such work, our discussions will be much less rewarding. So everyone should come to class ready with questions, concerns, objections, and new ideas. The harder we all work on our own outside of class, the more

we'll all learn together in class. Because participation in class is so important, attendance at all classes is required, and will be a factor in determining your final grade.

Weekly Response Papers

Each week, you will write one short (1–2 page) response paper, in which you may discuss either an issue in one of the readings or an issue raised in class. Response papers will be due by email by 5:00pm each Friday, and will be returned in class the following Tuesday.

Presentations

You will also, in rotation with your classmates, occasionally give a short in-class presentation. Your presentation should be designed to initiate discussion: so you should avoid mere summary of the reading, and instead raise a question left unanswered by the text, an objection to an argument given or a view taken in the text, a suggestion about how to improve on or go beyond the idea presented in the text, and so forth. This is, I recognize, not always an easy task. I encourage you, therefore, to visit me during my office hours and use me as a sounding board. Even more than that, I encourage you to talk to each other about the readings outside of class. Sometimes you don't realize that you have views about something you've read until you hear someone else taking an opposing view.

Papers

You will write two papers: the first, due at the end of fifth week, of 5–7 pages; the second, due at the beginning of the exam period, of 10–12 pages. Each student will be required to meet with the instructor to discuss the completed and graded first paper and, later, a draft or detailed outline of the second paper. Again, you should use my office hours freely, especially if you're unsure what to write about.

Grading Policies

Weekly response papers will be graded on a check–minus, check, check–plus system: a check indicates that your response meets expectations, a check–minus that it falls short, and a check–plus that it exceeds them. Presentations will not be

graded, except as a part of your general participation grade. Your two papers will be graded according to the criteria laid out at the end of this syllabus.

The overall breakdown of your course grade will be as follows:

Mid-Term Paper: 30%

Final Paper: 45%

Weekly Response Papers: 10%

Participation: 15%

A note on Weekly Response Papers: if you receive all, or nearly all, checks, your overall score on the WRPs will be 10/10. Exceeding expectations (receiving check–pluses) can potentially raise your final grade, e.g., from a B+ to an A- if you have a high B+. Failing to meet expectations (receiving check–minuses), on the other hand, will simply lower your score on the WRP component of your grade.

Letter grades will be determined as follows: 97–100 is an A+, 93–96 is an A, 90–92 is an A-, 87–89 is a B+, and so on.

Schedule of Readings

Note: All readings will be made available on Chalk.

Introduction

October 2

Plato, *Meno*, 97a–98c

Plato, *Theaetetus*, 206c–210d

Part 1: Analyzing Knowledge

October 4: First Attempts

Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"

Keith Lehrer, "Knowledge, Truth, and Evidence" (1965)

October 9: Complications

Alvin Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing" (1967)

Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson, Jr., "Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief" (1969)

October 11: Externalism

Fred Dretske, "Conclusive Reasons" (1971)

October 16: Reliabilism

Robert Brandom, "Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism" (1998)

October 18: The Fork in the Road

Laurence Bonjour, "Internalism and Externalism" (2002)

October 23: Despair

Linda Zagzebski, "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems" (1994)

Part 2: Doubts, Alternatives, and Recent Developments

October 25: The End of Analysis?

Timothy Williamson, Introduction to *Knowledge and Its Limits* (2000)

October 30: A Wealth of Necessary Conditions

Duncan Pritchard, "Sensitivity, Safety, and Anti-Luck Epistemology" (2008)

November 1: Standing Analysis On Its Head

Keith Hossack, "'*S* Knows that *A*'" (*The Metaphysics of Knowledge*, Chapter 1) (2007)

Part 3: Knowledge and the Philosophy of Mind

November 6: Knowledge and the Mind I

Wilfrid Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (*EPM*), Parts I–II (1956)

November 8: Knowledge and the Mind II

Sellars, *EPM*, Parts III–IV

November 13: Knowledge and the Mind III

Sellars, *EPM*, Part VIII

November 15: What It Takes To Be a Thinker

Davidson, "The Myth of the Subjective" (1988)

OPTIONAL: Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge" (1983)

November 20: Knowledge on Top of Knowledge

Timothy Williamson, "Evidence" (*Knowledge and Its Limits*, Chapter 9) (2000)

November 22

NO CLASS – Thanksgiving

Part 4: Capacities for Knowledge

November 27: Externalism Revisited

John McDowell, "Experiencing the World" (1999)

November 29: A Satisfying Framework for Externalism?

John McDowell, "Perception as a Capacity for Knowledge" (2011)

December 4: Putting It All Together

Sebastian Rödl, "Receptive Knowledge" (*Self-Consciousness*, Chapter 2) (2007)

Criteria for Grading Papers

100–90
Papers that score in this range do several important things. They demonstrate a clear grasp both of the issues in the text they are discussing and, more generally, of the arguments and various positions that arise in the debate they're discussing. They are written clearly and gracefully, and possess an overall structure that helps the reader follow the argument of the paper. And they say something interesting and to some degree original: they express an ambitious point, some new angle on the material, that was not explicit in the text under consideration; but they do so by engaging carefully with the text and its arguments. (In other words, they do not make fanciful and speculative leaps of thought that are not grounded in the text being discussed.) After reading such papers, one's understanding of the main text, and its issues, is now advanced in interesting ways.

89–83
Papers in this range show a generally good grasp of the issues in the text under consideration.They are written relatively clearly and gracefully, and possess a meaningful structure that helps the reader follow the argument. While these papers go beyond simply summarizing the arguments of the text they engage with, they fail to say something really interesting and so do not engage with the text in a manner that reveals interesting and original thought.

82–77
Papers in this range (1) fail to demonstrate a strong grasp of the central issues in the text (they may misconstrue its points, or focus their attention on peripheral issues without making a case for their importance), (2) suffer from significant moments of unclear writing and argumentation, (3) fail to have a sufficiently clear focus or thesis, or (4) do no more than summarize the main points of the text.

76–70
Papers in this range either show significant deficits in comprehension of the centrals issues in the text or demonstrate serious problems in terms of clarity of writing and overall argumentation.

Below 70
Papers in this range show significant deficits in comprehending the text they discuss and have serious problems with respect to clarity of expression.