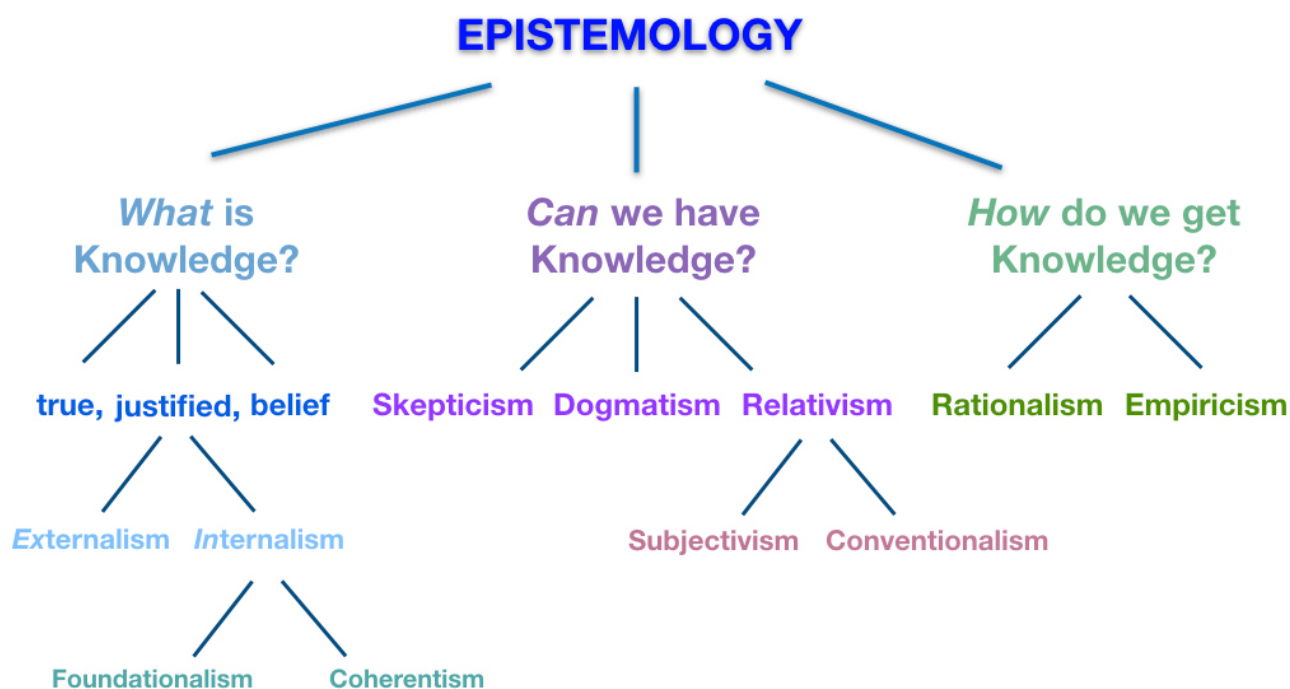


CHAPTER 2

Epistemology

The Philosophical Investigation of Knowledge

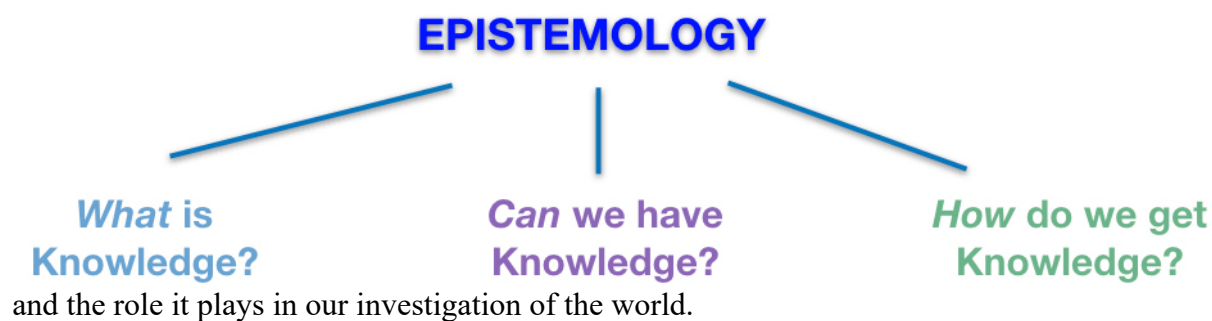
In the previous section we struggled with the question, “What is Philosophy?” We answered the question by examining the etymology of the word, what Philosophy means in contemporary higher education, and the historical context in which it began. Then we examined three paradigmatic philosophers from three different historical periods to get a flavor of what *doing* Philosophy is like. In this section we’re going to examine Philosophy by taking a closer look at one of the academic subdisciplines of Philosophy: **Epistemology**.



The term ‘epistemology’, like many of the technical terms in the discipline is derived from the Greek language; in this case, ‘*logos*’ and ‘*episteme*’. *Logos* is a Greek term that can be rendered “argument”, or “account” or “explanation”, or “theory”. *Episteme* is best translated “knowledge” in this context, though as we discovered in Plato’s Defense of Sokrates it has a more precise connotation in Greek. So, for the purpose of our investigation we’ll take ‘epistemology’ in its literal sense of “the theory of knowledge”.

Of course, it’s not really that simple since there is no single theory of knowledge. From the presocratic beginnings of the discipline, philosophers have struggled to give rational (i.e., *logical*) accounts of the world around them. It quickly became apparent that differentiating between *believing* something and *knowing* something was an essential component of doing Philosophy. So in that sense, Epistemology was an original component of the philosophical

revolution of the Seventh Century BCE. But it would be nearly two hundred years before Plato attempted the first truly systematic analysis of the concept of knowledge. His most famous student, Aristotle, had serious misgivings about Plato's account and would eventually offer an alternative. And since that time, right up to the present, philosophers have been examining, offering, critiquing, adjusting, and reexamining our understanding of the nature of knowledge



At the heart of Epistemology there is a core of three basic questions:

Each question focuses on a different problem regarding knowledge. The first, and perhaps most fundamental, is simply understanding what the word 'knowledge' means. As you will find throughout this course we always begin by defining our terms so we can avoid equivocating (i.e., applying different meanings to the same term in a single context), thus the first question is simply exploring the meaning of 'knowledge' and what makes it a distinct cognitive state as opposed to belief, hunch, hope, reflection, opinion and so on.

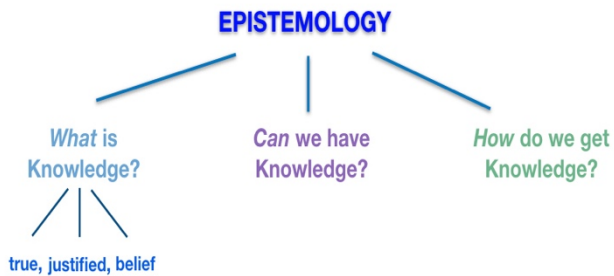
Upon reflection, it's obvious that knowledge and belief are related, but distinct; both are mental states regarding how the world is, but knowledge is stronger than belief. It may be less obvious, however, that knowledge is *dependent* upon belief. Suppose someone said, "I **know** triangles are three sided, but I don't **believe** it." We would consider anyone who said something like this to either be joking, or cognitively deficient in some serious way! Knowledge *requires* belief; we cannot know something without first believing it. Believing is the first step toward knowledge. But since it is obvious that knowledge is *stronger* than belief, there must be further conditions to meet.

Consider the situation where you are arguing with a friend about some matter of fact (*not opinion*). For example, suppose you are claiming that "Star Wars: Episode 4" premiered in 1977 while your friend claims it was released in 1979. It cannot be the case that you're both right (though you *could* both be wrong); at least one of you claims to *know* something when you don't! This scenario leads us to the second necessary component of knowledge: the truth. In order to *know* that something is the case, what you claim to know **must be true**. That is to say, the belief you hold must accurately reflect the actual state of affairs, it must correspond to how the world actually is. Alternatively, we could say that knowledge can never be false.

So far we've established that knowledge requires having true beliefs. But is that enough? A simple thought experiment demonstrates that it isn't. Suppose your friend claimed that "The Empire Strikes Back" was released in 1980 (which in fact it *was*). Your friend holds a *true*

belief. But does your friend *know* that the blockbuster sequel was released in that year? Perhaps.

But suppose you push further and ask *why* she thinks that, and in reply she said, “I guessed.” She holds a true belief, but guessing correctly is clearly not the same as knowing. So, we can clearly see that merely ***holding true beliefs is not sufficient*** for having knowledge.



The third necessary condition for having knowledge is having adequate *justification*. In other words, what sort of evidence can a person provide to support their claim, how can they show or demonstrate that their beliefs correspond to how the world actually is? As you can imagine, this is where it begins to get difficult. How much evidence should we consider *adequate*? What *kind* of evidence should we consider? How do we know when we’ve arrived at an adequate amount of the right kind of evidence to achieve knowledge? All these questions have to be addressed, and as you can imagine, philosophers disagree on the answers.

Once we’ve established a working definition of ‘knowledge’ (e.g., true, justified, belief) we can proceed to examine the second question: is it possible for finite beings like humans to actually achieve knowledge? Here again we’ll find a disagreement among philosophers. Some will argue that we can never reach a state of certainty in regard to our beliefs and, therefore, we fail to have knowledge. These **skeptics** are opposed by philosophers who think we *can* achieve certainty, if not in regard to all our beliefs, at least to some degree. As we’ll see with both skeptics and **dogmatists** (i.e., those who think we *can* have knowledge) there is a continuum of positions from absolute skepticism (no one can know anything) on one extreme to absolute dogmatism (anybody can know everything) on the other.

A third position regarding our ability to have knowledge is called **Relativism**. This is a radical position which will challenge some of the conditions we laid out in our definition of knowledge earlier. We’ll come back to this position in more detail in class.



Of course, the burden of proof always falls on those who make a positive claim, so the dogmatists owe us an explanation of *how* we can actually go about getting knowledge. This brings us to our third core questions in Epistemology: How do we get knowledge?

Here again we'll see that there is significant disagreement among philosophers. Fortunately, from the many different theories of knowledge put forward over the last two millennia, there are significant similarities that allow us to group dogmatic theories into two main groups:

Rationalism and Empiricism.

In order to get a better sense of these two approaches to how knowledge might be attained, we'll look at four paradigmatic philosophers, two rationalists and two empiricists, who exemplify these two very different approaches.