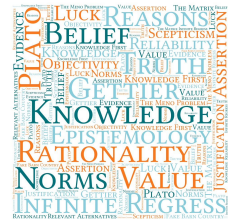


JAKE CHANDLER



Think of all the different beliefs you hold about various matters. How many of these, if any, constitute genuine knowledge rather than mere opinion? What does this distinction amount to and why is it important? To what extent do the standards for what counts as knowledge depend on context? Can you know something without knowing that you know it? What makes a belief justified or reasonable? Is it ever reasonable to hold a belief if you have no evidence to support it? What is the value of knowledge in our individual lives and in society? These are some of the central questions in epistemology—the philosophical study of the nature, extent, and value, of knowledge and justified belief. In this course we will explore these and related questions using both historical and contemporary sources. Epistemological questions crop up absolutely everywhere—in science, the humanities, politics, religion, and everyday life—and this course will give you the tools to tackle such questions wherever you find them.

The La Trobe Handbook entry for the subject can be found [here](#).

“Engagement in this subject has improved my academic achievement in my education (primary) subjects. For example, my ability to identify and address arguments has improved allowing me to produce well-written essays. Thus, this subject has helped me to understand the significance of arguments and claims within academic literature to complete literature reviews and essays.

The content was interesting and engaging.”

“The content was complex and stimulating, and certainly helped me to think in new ways. Although I find this subject fairly challenging, Jake has always been very willing to help and clearly put a lot of effort and care into constructing lessons in order to help us understand. Jake is also a very very considerate and understanding teacher who is happy to help and accommodate students in difficult circumstances, which I appreciated greatly. I think the best aspect of this subject is how the class is run and structured.”

“The lecture slides were well constructed and the reading list was helpful and appropriate each week.”

“The Lectures were fascinating and provided great detail in what was being taught, without taking too much time to explain any unnecessary elementary material- which other subjects are prone to do. Furthermore, Tutorial discussions were greatly enjoyable and vastly rewarding- especially when the weekly Forum Discussion Questions were merged with the Group Discussions.”

“...It gave me a better understanding of the subject material, and being able to have structive conversations and debates about the material is what makes it intellectually stimulating. I would’ve be profoundly disappointed if this a purely online subject without tutorials just automated quizzes/recorded lectures, and would’ve dropped out of this subject if that had the case. Just want say that Jake Chandler was a very good and if not one of the best lecturers I have had at La Trobe, and delivered the content in a way that was easy to undertsand and intellectually stimulating.”

“The complex topics were made easy to understand by Dr. Chandler, it was critical to have both the online lectures and the in-person discussion to be able to really grasp the concepts. Overall I found it to be an engaging and interesting subject.”

3 Assessment and teaching activities

Assessment:

- Essay 2, 2,000 words (45%)
- Essay 1, 1,000 words (35%)
- Early assessment quiz (10%)
- Online forum contributions, 10 x 120 words (10%)

Teaching Activities:

- Weekly pre-recorded video lectures (1 hour)
- Weekly tutorials, face-to-face or online — 30 minute Q&A plus small-group discussion (1.5 hours)

4 Weekly breakdown

Preliminary resources

These materials sit outside the twelve teaching weeks. The probability notes support Weeks 5, 8 and 9, and the essay-writing guide is worth reading before the first essay is due.

- Subject administration (*provided to enrolled students*)
- Probability: the basics
- Probability: the Condorcet Jury Theorem
- Philosophical essay writing

Week 1: Subject overview, and the analysis of knowledge

This module provides you with an introduction to the subject. We will discuss the scope and importance of the philosophical discipline of epistemology and note the central importance of the concept of knowledge (more specifically “knowledge-that”), a discussion of which will occupy a good portion of the modules to come.

We first briefly consider the question of whether, in addition to knowledge-that, there exist distinct alternative modes of knowledge (“knowledge-how”, etc.).

We then explore the notion of philosophical analysis before taking some first steps to try to analyse the concept of knowledge (-that). These first steps immediately lead us to an infamous difficulty known as the “Gettier Problem”.

- Slides:

Subject overview

Varieties of knowledge

The analysis of knowledge

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 2: The Gettier Problem

In this module, we critically discuss some classic responses to the Gettier Problem. These responses include the thought that to have knowledge, the grounds for our beliefs (a) cannot be false, (b) must 100% guarantee the truth of those beliefs or again (c) must support those beliefs in a way that isn’t “defeated” by further considerations.

In discussing option (b), we consider an argument related to an extremely famous philosophical puzzle: the “Lottery Paradox”.

- Slides:

Responding to Gettier: no false grounds, infallibilism

Responding to Gettier: no defeaters

Supplementary: the lottery argument, visually

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 3: More on the Gettier Problem

In this module, we take a look at two more responses to the Gettier Problem: (i) the suggestion that, in order to know, one’s relevant belief must stand in an appropriate causal relation to what is believed and (ii) the idea that that this belief must be the result of a “reliable” cognitive process. Like the previous suggestions, these arguably have problems too.

The apparent lack of progress on the Gettier issue has led some to question whether the enterprise of trying to analyse knowledge in terms of constituent parts is simply misguided and that we should instead treat knowledge as a primitive concept. We discuss a general argument to that effect.

- Slides:

Responding to Gettier: causation, reliabilism

Can knowledge be analysed? Worries from Gettier

Can knowledge be analysed? Knowledge first

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 4: The value of knowledge

In this module, we consider how to account for the common intuition that knowledge is generally a good thing to have. One thought is that this is so because true belief is generally a good thing to have. But this leaves us with the problem of explaining why knowledge seems more valuable than mere true belief (the “Meno Problem”).

Consideration of the possible added value of justification leave us with the “Secondary Value Problem” of accounting for the value of knowledge over and above true justified belief. We discuss a proposal due to Williamson, according to which the value of knowledge is due to its relative stability.

- Slides:

[The value of knowledge: two problems](#)

[The value of knowledge: indefeasibility](#)

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 5: Rational belief and practical interests, Part I

In this module, we explore the issue of whether we are sometimes entitled to hold certain beliefs partly on the basis of practical considerations.

We then move on to consider Pascal’s famous claim that we ought to bet on the existence of God on a cost/benefit basis. After a gentle introduction to the basic notions of decision theory, a formal framework for reaching rational decisions, we look at two versions of Pascal’s argument and various criticisms that have been levelled against them.

- Slides:

[Pascal: introduction](#)

[Pascal: the argument from dominance](#)

[Pascal: the argument from expectation](#)

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 6: Rational belief and practical interests, Part II, and the limits of knowledge, Part I

In this module, we are split across two topics. We first continue our discussion of practical reasons for belief with a classic historical exchange between James and Clifford. Clifford argues that believing on the basis of practical concerns rather than sufficient evidence is morally reprehensible. James disagrees.

We then move onto an altogether different topic: concerns about whether we in fact know far less than we usually take ourselves to (a variety of a view known as “Scepticism”). I introduce a classic argument to that effect: the “Argument from Ignorance”.

- Slides:

[Rational belief and practical interests: Clifford vs James](#)

[Scepticism: introduction](#)

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 7: The limits of knowledge, Part II

In this module, we take a look at some of the possible responses to the “Argument from Ignorance” introduced in the last module. The latter goes as follows: (i) if we knew the things we usually take ourselves to know, we would have to be able to rule out our being in various situations of massive deception (e.g. being in the Matrix), but (ii) we cannot rule this out and hence (iii) we do not know the things we usually take ourselves to know.

The problem is that (i) and (ii) seem plausible but (iii) does not. Our first response (Closure Denialism) denies (iii) by denying (i) and tries to explain why (i) nevertheless seems true. Our second response (Scepticism) accepts (iii) and tries to explain why (iii) nevertheless seems false.

Our final, intriguing, response (Contextualism) grants that (iii) is true when uttered in the context of the sceptical argument but claims it is false when uttered outside of that context: the meaning of “know” shifts according to its context of utterance.

- Slides:

Scepticism: closure denialism

Scepticism: contextualism

Scepticism: scepticism

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 8: Democratising epistemology — the use of survey methods

In previous modules, we have seen how philosophical claims have traditionally been assessed in the light of philosophers’ intuitions about the applicability of a given concept in various hypothetical scenarios.

Recent years, however, have seen the emergence of “Experimental Philosophy” in which lay people’s intuitions on test scenarios are polled, with the hope to obtain a majority verdict. We discuss a rationale for this appeal to the “Wisdom of the Crowds” in the form of the famous Condorcet Jury Theorem.

We then present and critically discuss a number of provocative studies that allegedly demonstrate an effect of “irrelevant factors” on epistemological intuitions and conclude that our intuitions (even as philosophers) with respect to the relevant scenarios ought not be trusted.

- Slides:

Experimental epistemology: introduction

Experimental epistemology: the studies

Experimental epistemology: critiques

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 9: Aggregating judgments

On the heels of the last module, we take a closer look at the idea of aggregating the opinions of a group of people.

While the Condorcet Jury Theorem tells us that majority voting on single questions (e.g. Do I know that Tom Grabbit stole the book?) yields some very promising results, the so-called “Discursive Dilemma” shows that majority voting on multiple logically connected questions can lead to inconsistent group answers.

We examine a result related to an extremely famous and deep theorem of voting theory (Arrow's Theorem) which suggests that this worry about inconsistency generalises to many aggregation methods beside majority voting.

- Slides:

Judgment aggregation: introduction

Judgment aggregation: escape routes

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 10: The value of cognitive diversity

Building on our brief presentation of the Condorcet Jury Theorem, we consider the concept of diversity, and more specifically cognitive diversity, and the manners in which it might aid, as is often thought, society's search for truth.

A key to understanding the phenomena that we discuss turns out to be the notion of “negative dependence” between inquirers.

- Slides:

Cognitive diversity: introduction

Cognitive diversity: discussion

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 11: Evidence and the law, Part I

In this module, we make a foray into applied epistemology, in this instance, the application of epistemology to issues surrounding legal evidence.

We notably discuss the idea that legal standards of proof (e.g. “beyond reasonable doubt” or “on the preponderance of the evidence”) can be understood as probabilistic thresholds and take a look at some intriguing cases that suggest that the relation between standards of proof and statistical evidence may not be entirely straightforward.

- Slides:

Evidence and the law: introduction

Evidence and the law: a puzzle

Evidence and the law: responses

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*

Week 12: Evidence and the law, Part II

In this module, we continue our foray into legal epistemology. We look at how decision-theoretic considerations about the costs of judicial error can be used to justify different standards of proof in civil and criminal cases, ask what is really being asked of the juror by the slogan that someone is “innocent until proven guilty”, and examine the puzzle of why, in many jurisdictions, defendants raising affirmative defences such as self-defence or insanity must prove their own innocence to a standard that can equal or even exceed the one required of the prosecution.

- Slides:

- Evidence and the law: setting the standards

- Evidence and the law: the presumption of innocence

- Evidence and the law: the burden of proof

- *Lecture recordings are available on request.*