

PHIL352-Theory of Knowledge: Skepticism

Aristotle's *Metaphysics* begins: "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves." This is especially the case with sight, he claims, which "above all senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things." As much as humans are naturally inclined towards knowledge, and arguably for this very reason, they are at the same time plagued by epistemic doubts. Our cognitive powers are fallible. Even our sensory capacities, which Aristotle praises, are vulnerable to error. When this happens, our experience seems indistinguishable from what it is when we get things right. How far might this sort of doubt extend, and what is its ultimate philosophical significance? Is there such a thing as "knowledge" (as distinct from mere opinion)? Can we set out criteria for it, and if so, can we know in individual cases whether we satisfy these criteria, or not?

Philosophers from antiquity to this day have coped with the specter of skepticism in different ways. In this course, we will chart a path from pre-Socratic philosophy to our own time regarding the problem of knowledge. The first part of the course will explore classical texts. We will start with fragments of pre-Socratic thinkers, such as Xenophanes (6th century BCE; "opinion is wrought over everything", F35), followed by excerpts from Aristotle (384–322 BCE), Plato (427–348 BCE), and Hellenistic philosophers—including the Pyrrhonist Skeptic, Sextus Empiricus (2nd century CE). We'll then turn to the early modern period, with figures like René Descartes (1596–1650) and David Hume (1711–1776), culminating in Immanuel Kant's Transcendental Deduction in *the Critique of Pure Reason* (2nd ed.; 1787). In reading these philosophers, we will explore different forms and targets of skepticism: the external world, other minds, causality, and value.

The second part of the course will consider the role skepticism has played in 20th century analytic philosophy, up to the present. Starting with Edmund Gettier's seminal essay, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" (1963), in which he challenges a prevalent conception of knowledge as justified true belief, we will consider the interplay between different theories of knowledge and the problem of skepticism as it appears in the writings of recent analytic philosophers. We will read authors such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Donald Davidson, John McDowell, Stanley Cavell, Hillary Putnam, Alvin Goldman, Robert Nozick, and Christine Korsgaard.

All readings for PHIL352 will be available as PDFs. Grades will be assigned based on two short papers (4–6pp., 40% of total grade), one longer paper (6–8pp. 50%), and class participation (10%).