

Chapter 1

Introduction

Traditionally epistemology, the branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge—what knowledge is and how it is attained—begins with the question, what can I know? The obvious response is to carry out a survey of what I, or you, or whoever is carrying out the inquiry, have in mind. We carry out an inventory of our mental contents, and then we might try to establish which items are true, which ones are likely, which ones seem unlikely or improbable and which, on reflection, seem to be just plain wrong. We might try and establish a set of criteria for evaluating mental contents; some things seem to be obvious or self-evident, others plausible, and so on.

The difficulty that soon emerges is that we seem to know more than we have plausible grounds for, and this is where epistemology as a classic set of philosophical problems gets its bite. Perhaps the mind is a blank slate at birth, and all that I know I have come to know through my senses. The contents of my mind got there by sight, sound, touch, taste or smell. If so, the senses deliver to my mind what is given to them by the outer world, and my mind contains representations (literally “re-presentations”) of what is outside me. The mind takes these representations and compares and contrasts them; I note that the sky is blue, the sea is blue, that man over there is wearing a blue shirt, and from these and other experiences I abstract out an idea of blueness, an idea that I can apply generally. Such an approach is classical *empiricism*, and the sorts of capacities allowed to the mind of comparing and contrasting to abstract out general ideas is a commonplace of empiricism. But it falls short when it comes to ideas that do not

seem to have any ground in experience, ideas concerning God, the infinite, cause, necessity and personal identity, most of which we will touch on at some point in the following.

The other great tradition in theory of knowledge is *rationalism*. Philosophers in this tradition tend to start with a rather more elevated view of human nature. Whereas empiricists tend to take a hard-headed and, literally, down-to-earth view of what we can and cannot know, rationalists tend to see us as a mix of the worldly and the divine, with the mind as a “divine spark”, a fragment of man that is at least on the way to being God-like. Knowledge comes primarily from reflection on the mind itself, which is far more than a blank slate. For the rationalist what is most important in our knowledge comes from such reflection, and this is how we get knowledge of what seems to lie beyond presentation—God, the infinite, cause, necessity, personal identity. But while the empiricist has problems with accounting for what we think we know even though it cannot be derived from the senses, the rationalist faces problems with explaining how what is primarily derived from reflecting on the mind is fitted to navigating the physical world we interact with. All too often the rationalist suggests that we have knowledge of what we cannot sensibly seem to know; if the infinite really is infinite, after all, and we are finite, how can we talk sensibly about the infinite? It must surely be beyond us.

This is the classic debate in epistemology, and it is the primary concern in the following. It can be traced back to arguments that raged in the Academy in ancient Athens, between Plato and his rationalist followers and the more empirically-minded Aristotelians. It provides the framework for the debate between the rationalists of the modern period (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz) and the slightly later empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume). It is the basis for Kant’s great synthetic works, in which he tries to reconcile these two approaches and take the best from each. But Kant’s synthesis of these two great traditions led to a whole series of further arguments concerning the relations of epistemology and science.

Although our topic is epistemology, what has been said so far has touched on nearly all the mainstream topics of philosophy. We have touched on the philosophy of mind and on ontology, the study of being, of what there actually is, including the question

of whether or not there is a God, and what we can know about God. We have also touched on the philosophy of science and the relations between philosophy and science. There are close interconnections between all the main branches of philosophy and it is hard to have a view in any particular branch, including epistemology, that does not have consequences for other aspects of the subject. Superficially it looks like the rationalist holds all the cards, as she can have views on God, on the mind, on our capacities to know truth, that are not obviously available to the empiricist. But on the other hand the empiricist can argue that much of this is illusory, mere speculation about what we cannot really know. And here the empiricist can point to the advances of modern science, while conveniently forgetting that both Newton and Einstein relied on thought experiments that go well beyond what can be established by means of the senses alone. At bottom philosophy does not have neat divisions, because there are all sorts of interconnections between its various branches.

As well as these relations between its own branches, philosophy has lots of interconnections with other disciplines. It borders on psychology, theology, and the social and the natural sciences. It is only the last of these that we will be concerned with. For much of the last 2500 years what we would now call “science” was called “natural philosophy”, as opposed to moral philosophy. This has important consequences for reading most of the philosophers discussed here, certainly up to and including Kant, because none of them thinks that there is a significant difference between “doing philosophy” and “doing science”. Although there is some divergence after Newton, which is why I have included Newton in the text, the separation of philosophy and science that we now have is one that only became established in the nineteenth century. I think you will find it helpful when reading Kant and his predecessors to think of them as contributing to science as much as to philosophy. This is certainly the line I have followed here.

This said, although the rationalism/empiricism framework is helpful, it is only a guide. It was established by Kant, in the final section of his monumental *Critique of Pure Reason*, but in many ways it reflects Kant’s compulsive need to impose a systematic framework on everything he came into intellectual contact with. While it reflects broad tendencies among the people he was writing about, they rarely fit comfortably into their Kantian pigeon-

holes. The framework has its value but I would encourage you to approach any of the great, and the not-so-great, philosophers with an open mind, and be prepared to be surprised. Berkeley, for example, does not fit very comfortably into any mould.

Concerning the organisation of the text, I have followed a traditional pattern of treating rationalism first, then empiricism, then Kant. This reflects a more-or-less chronological pattern, and that each of these thinkers read, or was at least aware of, the views of their contemporaries and predecessors. There was a network of intellectuals in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, aware of one another's work via correspondence, learned societies and journals as well as through published books. This network expanded greatly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and became increasingly university-based. After Kant I have chosen to fast-forward to the twentieth century and take a more topic-based approach.

With the best will in the world the following should not all be obvious on first reading. Unlike some disciplines philosophy does not have a linear structure. Students and practitioners of philosophy read the same great classic texts over and over, trying to understand them. When he read Descartes' *Geometry*, Newton said that he read a few pages until he did not understand any more, then he would go away for a while and let what he had read run around in his mind. He returned over and over again to the book until he had worked right through it. Wittgenstein has a wonderful metaphor (in *On Certainty*) of light dawning slowly over a plane. This is a common experience of coming to philosophy, so do not be discouraged if some of the following seems baffling on a first, or even a second or third reading. Come back later and you will often find that what seemed obscure has become clear. Studying philosophy can be the most extraordinary intellectual journey and I hope this text will give you some signposts on the way.

Turning from the sublime to the practical, I have written this book with two audiences in mind. The first is students of philosophy, from AS/Baccalaureate through to advanced-level undergraduates. While the book is certainly demanding of an AS level student, it covers the whole of the syllabus of the AQA AS module 1 on theory of knowledge. My companion book *The Theory of Knowledge, a Coursebook* (Lutterworth Press, 2008) is aimed

directly at the AQA AS module 1, while this book is intended primarily for teachers of that course and more advanced students of philosophy.

The second audience is the general reader, and I have tried to write an accessible book that deals with the subject in a thorough fashion but without assuming any prior knowledge of philosophy.

I should point out that the approach taken here is distinctly unconventional. Although there are signs that Newton is edging into the mainstream philosophical canon, my approach is more heavily weighted to correlating philosophical developments and the rise of modern science than is usual in overtly philosophical introductions. Hence the quotations taken from original sources are more extensive than is usual for a book of this kind. In a manner of speaking the quotations are the evidence for a theory of the development of modern philosophy, and they are intended to be sufficient to substantiate this approach.

References are, wherever possible, to the page or section numbering used in standard editions; in the case of Plato, Stephanus page numbering, Descartes, volume/page numbering in the Adam & Tannery edition, and so on. The editions used are listed in the Bibliography. Page references for Newton are to *Principia Mathematica* and *Opticks* first, and to *Isaac Newton, Philosophical Writings* second. For *Principia Mathematica* I have used Andrew Motte's translation, but the page numbers given are for the Cohen/Whitman translation (as used in *Isaac Newton, Philosophical Writings*). Translations from Descartes' *Meditations* are by John Veitch (1901), available on-line (<http://www.wright.edu/cola/-descartes/mede.html>), with minor alterations. Words in **boldface** have an entry in the Glossary. These entries either refer back to the text or expand on it, and they provide an alternative way of reading the book.

Finally, a comment on my liberal use of the "vertical pronoun". The vertical pronoun is widely frowned on in educational and academic contexts, but if you look closely most authors substitute "here" or "in the present work" or some such self-referential indicator, because books and journal articles are the work of engaged, sentient beings, not robots or monkeys with typewriters. Philosophy may sometimes be about facts but it is not itself a matter of stating and arranging facts, and eliminating the vertical pronoun is, to my mind, a curiously self-defeating denial that

the best philosophical works are the products of interestingly cantankerous, passionate and often partisan authors.

Relatedly when an author uses “I” they often intend the I to be you; that you are to put yourself in their shoes in order to see what they see. The I of Descartes’ *Meditations*, for example, is just such an invitation to you to be I. The truly great philosophers are an amalgam of hard-headed rational, logical thinking and extraordinary insight into the human situation. You can do logic in the third person, insight is more personal and immediate.

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