

LEVEL 7 ASSESSMENT SPECIFICATION

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Programme:	MA PHILOSOPHY		
Module:	KNOWLEDGE, REASON AND REALITY		
Module code:	HPPH7010	Contribution to Overall Module Assessment (%):	50
Lecturer:	RH	Internal Verifier:	TN
Assignment Title:	Essay – ass 2	Word count (or equivalent):	4,000 WORDS
Submission deadline:	TBA	Return date of provisional marks & written feedback:	4 WEEKS AFTER SUBMISSION
Submission method:	All written assessments, where practical and possible, must be submitted via Turnitin unless otherwise instructed by the Lecturer. (Please DO NOT put this assessment specification into Turnitin or it will match many similarities with other students' submissions.) Alternative submission method (if applicable): Late submission of the assessment will result in a late penalty mark. Penalties for late submission: Up to one week late, maximum mark of 50%. Over one week late, 0%. Only the Extenuating Circumstances Panel may approve a change to submission dates.		
Academic honesty / referencing:	Academic honesty is required. In the main body of your submission you must give credit to authors on whose research and ideas your work is based. Append to your submission a reference list that indicates the books, articles, etc. that you have used, cited or quoted in order to complete this assessment.		

1. How (if at all) is knowledge possible in the light of the Heraclitean doctrine of flux?
2. 'Although the work of Plato has been criticised by many philosophers, both early and contemporary ones, there is no doubt that his work has played a central role in the history of ideas and the development of contemporary philosophy. A great many of the issues and concerns of modern philosophers were originally taken up by Plato, some 2,300 years earlier' (RH, Lecture for CSPH7040). Discuss. In your discussion, you should incorporate an assessment of Plato's contribution to epistemology.
3. Can scientists prove that a formulation of a law of nature is true? Provide reasons / support for your answer and discuss with reference to the problem of induction.
4. What are the chief problems that philosophers have confronted in providing a definition of knowledge that would stand firm against the threat of sceptical doubt?

Choose one of the following essay questions:

TASK DESCRIPTION

Upon the successful completion of this module, the student should be able to:

- Demonstrate a sophisticated critical awareness of various views on truth, belief, knowledge, and the possibility of knowledge;
- Demonstrate an advanced understanding of the importance of epistemology in the development of the history of ideas;
- Demonstrate an advanced level of knowledge of the ideas and positions of key philosophers central to epistemology.

Module Learning Outcomes
(from module syllabus)

Introduction

Over the years, providing a definition for knowledge that can withstand scepticism has not been an easy endeavour for philosophers. There have been many attempts that have been refuted and arguably proven to be insufficient. In this paper, I'll be discussing the main problems that philosophers have encountered when trying to provide a definition of knowledge that can stand firmly against scepticism. The philosophers the paper will discuss include Descartes, Hume, Gettier, and Williamson. Further, the paper will look at how philosophers use scepticism to develop their epistemological theories. It should be mentioned that the widely accepted definition for knowledge in philosophy is "a justified true belief" (JTB). However, we will be looking at why Gettier thinks that is an insufficient definition for knowledge. The Critical Evaluation section will consist of my engagement with these different philosophical perspectives on the definition of knowledge. The paper will be split into eight sections. Lastly, I will also be arguing for what should be looked for when trying to uncover the best definition of knowledge.

Before we delve into the paper, the following is an analysis of the 'justified true belief' theory:

1. The Justification Condition: this condition asserts that a person must have at the very least some sort of justification for believing a proposition, whether that is actual evidence or logical reasoning; it can be debated what is justifiable.
2. The Truth Condition: I assert that in order for something to be defined as knowledge, it has to be true. Otherwise, it may be only be called a 'belief'.
3. The Belief Condition: surely the person that is making a claim to 'know' something, believes in what they are claiming to know.

The JTB theory will be looked at further in my critical evaluation.

Clear and distinct perception

Descartes was one of the most influential Western philosophers. In his search for something that is undoubtable, he systematically calls all his previous beliefs into question. The following passage from Descartes' letters to Regius looks at how Descartes makes a distinction between convictions and knowledge, and how he defines knowledge.

"I distinguish the two as follows: there is conviction when there remains some reason which might lead us to doubt, but knowledge is conviction based on a reason so strong that it can never be shaken by any stronger reason." (Descartes, 1604)

It can be deduced from the letter that his definition of knowledge is that it is a "strong conviction based on reason". However, whether this definition can withstand sceptical doubt is debatable. It has been mentioned that even if Descartes has grasped something that he believes is undoubtable, it would not be accessible to others. Further, many would, with good reason, be sceptical of his subjective knowledge claims. (Knowledge, n.d.)

This is followed by the fact that Descartes was not a sceptic; he employed scepticism as a methodical approach in coming up with what he calls 'clear and distinct ideas'. According to Green, 'Descartes used scepticism to displace the senses'; this to Descartes was because he concluded that although our senses are the main source of our knowledge, we may be deceived

Revised

what I consider to be the...

by them. Which is why Descartes conforms to rationality, to him reasoning and logic are the main sources of knowledge.

Cogito ergo sum

In the Second Meditation, Descartes has declared that all his beliefs can be doubted. He then tries to formulate a 'certain truth' that cannot be doubted whatsoever. Descartes argues that his existence cannot be doubted, for even if there were 'a deceiver of supreme power' that is repeatedly deceiving him, then he must exist in order to be deceived (Newman, 2019). The phrase '*cogito ergo sum*', translated as 'I think, therefore I am' was what Descartes believed to be the foundations of "anyone who philosophizes in an orderly way". (Newman, 2019)

This section correlates to the rest of the paper, and the question of chief problems that philosophers face when trying to provide a definition for knowledge, because to Descartes the *cogito* is an undoubtable certainty, and perfect knowledge. However, even the *cogito* has faced a lot of sceptical doubt. I will explore Hume's angle on whether this can be called 'perfect knowledge' below.

Good signposting.

Refuting Scepticism

When we talk about contingent propositions, such as "it may rain tomorrow", there is an ambiguity in our language. "It may rain tomorrow" could mean that tomorrow truly has the potentiality for rain, or it could mean that we simply do not know whether or not it will rain tomorrow, a reflection of our own ignorance rather than a reflection on tomorrow itself. According to Moore, many philosophers have implied "that no contingent proposition is ever, as a matter of fact known to be true". He believes this is false, and he attempts to dispute that argument in his book "Certainty". Moore explains further that by making a proposition that begins with "it is possible that", in turn we are actually highlighting our ignorance in such a way that we are putting forth "that we do not know that *p* is false" rather than making an assertion that *p* is true.

"But even if this is so, it still remains true that from the mere fact that a proposition is contingent it never follows that it may be false; this remains true because from the mere fact that a proposition is contingent it never follows that it is not known to be true, and never follows, either, in the case of any particular person, that that person does not know it to be true." (Moore, 1968, p. 38)

Moore provides readers with a detailed exposition of how language plays a big role, especially when someone is trying to assert their knowledge of something.

Hume's Scepticism

Hume was an empiricist philosopher meaning he believed that most of our knowledge is acquired through sense impressions and experience. As opposed to Descartes, Hume's scepticism was more than just a methodical approach, but was a fundamental part of his philosophy. In his book "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding", Hume makes a distinction between 'Relations of Ideas' and 'Matters of Fact'. This, to Hume, sums up human understanding. Relations of Ideas can be proved intuitively or demonstratively, such as mathematical equations, and they may also be called deductive reasonings. Matters of Fact, however, are learned through experience and do not retain certainty; they are called "inductive inferences". Hume believed that deductive reasonings are independent of phenomenal reality, whereas the opposite is true for inductive inferences.

Insert ref. to Hume.

Ayer mentions that Hume raised a question that to this day philosophers cannot find definite answers for. It has been termed the Problem of Induction. Hume questions whether our method of asserting a conjunction is reasonable (Ayer, 2000). Hume states the following:

"probability is founded on the presumption of a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those, of which we have had none; and therefore 'tis impossible this presumption can arise from probability" (Hume, 1739-40)

To further explain Hume's point, our assertions are based on a probability that has been acquired through our experiences. For example, if I were to assert that the sun would rise tomorrow, the assertion would be based on my experience of the sun rising in the past. Based on this point, it is expected that Hume would not equate that assertion to perfect knowledge, because it's based on a probability. The problem lies with our expectations for the future to resemble the past.

So, what would Hume define as knowledge? It can be argued that he thinks only deductive reasonings can be demonstrated as true knowledge and this following passage would back up the claim:

"the only objects of the abstract science or of demonstration are quantity and number, and that all attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion. As the component parts of quantity and number are entirely similar, their relations become intricate and involved; and nothing can be more curious, as well as useful, than to trace, by a variety of mediums, their equality or inequality, through their different appearances" (Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, 1748, p. 112)

This passage could be understood to mean that for mathematical equations there aren't any conceivable arguments that could be made against them; thus it can withstand scepticism and may meet a definition of true knowledge. Whereas inductive inferences, matters of fact, or our existence is not demonstrable. In this way, Hume restricts deduction to propositions pertaining to quantity and number.' (Tweyman, 2006) This in relation to Descartes *cogito*, could be seen as a dispute towards it, because if it is undemonstrable, and the opposite of *cogito* is conceivable, then to Hume it would not be looked at as 'perfect knowledge'.

Gettier

Gettier argued that justified true beliefs are insufficient conditions in defining knowledge. In his paper 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' Gettier presented readers with two cases. The cases are concerned with epistemic luck, which basically means when one has a justified true belief that only turns out to be right by chance. This has been termed as The Gettier Problem; it has had a large impact on the acceptance of the tripartite JTB theory and could also be seen as a problem that philosophers have confronted when trying to provide a firm definition for knowledge. This issue has given a rise to several supposed solutions; some philosophers have proposed adding a fourth condition to the JTB theory, while others have abandoned the theory entirely. (Engel, N/A) In the critical evaluation section, I will discuss why I still believe that the JTB theory should remain intact.

Knowledge is a Mental State

In his book 'Knowledge and its Limits', Williamson argues that knowledge is a mental state. He describes it as a 'factive mental state'; '[Knowing] is a factive mental state, in the sense that only truths are known; by contrast, believing is a non-factive mental state, because both truths and falsehoods are believed.' Williamson argues that knowledge cannot be an analysis of the

Moore delves into the inconsistency of our language. He talks about language masking our own ignorance and that contingent propositions often reflect our own ignorance. I find that *that* only complicates further what we could be asserting, unless we use more vague terms such as 'it may rain tomorrow'. Although Moore says that it would only highlight our ignorance, that should not be an issue, as humans we cannot assert with certainty every proposition we make. Gettier's criticism of the tripartite JTB theory, on the other hand, has little to do with a lack of certainty; the issue he puts forth has more to do with probabilities. Out of a large number of people that claim to 'know' something, several may be justifiably right, others may be proven

I think that most of my research has shown me that one of the main issues philosophers have faced in providing a definition of knowledge that can withstand scepticism is a lack of conviction, and I believe that by providing this definition for knowledge, Descartes sets himself up for failure, because to a radical sceptic, like Hume for example, everything can be called into doubt. Hume would only define analytical propositions as true, which leads us to believe that we are extremely limited in what we can be certain of. Whether or not this affects what could be defined as knowledge is debatable. For the sake of my argument it does not, because I agree with two definitions of knowledge that will be further explored; that is the JTB theory, and that knowledge is a factive mental state.

Critical Evaluation

Williamson claims that if we hold back on extreme scepticism, we can develop our claims to knowledge. Generally speaking, Williamson says that we cannot know that which we do not know; however, we can know that there is something we cannot know. Williamson concludes the book by mentioning that some truths are unknowable, hence it would be impossible to know them as either true or false. This is what he calls the limits of our knowledge.

We can fall into scepticism if we attribute too much self-knowledge to the subject in bad cognitive circumstances, for the asymmetry in knowledge between the good and bad cases requires an asymmetry in self-knowledge. Once we relax our claims to self-knowledge, we strengthen our claim to knowledge of the external world. Sceptical arguments fail when they depend on exempting an internal world of appearances, for they depend on misconceiving appearances as just what they appear to be. The ruthless sceptic grants no exemptions. If the sceptic must argue that we never even know how things appear to us, should we still harbour the sneaking suspicion that scepticism is right after all?

Further, Williamson explores scepticism by making a distinction between a good case and a bad case. He states that the cases are symmetrical to a sceptic, meaning that an individual does not know which case one is in.

According to Williamson, knowledge is of prominent importance in the philosophy of the mind. He argues that believing happens prior to knowledge. Williamson comes to that conclusion by understanding the idea of belief in terms of knowledge, instead of understanding knowledge in terms of belief.

tripartite JTB theory. He believes that instead belief should be comprehended in terms of knowledge. On his account, when one believes something, it is to "roughly, act as though one knew it: a successful belief is knowledge". (Williamson, 2003, p. 1) He explains that although belief may be a necessary condition for knowledge it is insufficient because the argument that knowledge entails belief is circular. Williamson states that even if a belief were true because of epistemic luck, knowledge should not be relegated in the understanding of the mind, which is a response to Gettier's cases.

wrong, and only a remaining few would have been right due to epistemic luck. That does not negate the fact that they knew something, because they still fit the tripartite JTB theory, which has not been disproved. This will be looked at in more detail below.

There are no real similarities between Cartesian and Humean scepticism, besides that they have both arguably used scepticism methodically. Descartes was a bit more extreme in his approach; however, that did not work in his favour, because he started out on strong foundations but he could not follow through, especially during the last few meditations, in "The Meditations on First Philosophy". The point is that his conclusion, that "God is not a deceiver", leaves many people unsatisfied. Descartes' scepticism was more internal, meaning he questioned the existence of himself, and whether his perceptions were 'clear and distinct', whether he may be dreaming or not, and so on.

Hume's scepticism, on the other hand, deals more so with the external world. I say this because he makes a valid point when he argues that our inductive assertions are based on our past experiences. Hume has been known to criticise Descartes and his method of doubt, calling it 'entirely incurable' and further adding that 'no reasoning would ever bring us to a state of assurance.' (Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, 1748, p. 149) The reason Hume's scepticism resonates more with me is because it's consistent in a manner that Descartes scepticism wasn't. He asserts more than once that one cannot attain certainty from anything that isn't demonstrable, nor can one attain certainty when the opposite if it is conceivable.

To reiterate, the cases that Gettier puts forth seem like rare occurrences, and it should be considered whether these rare occurrences of epistemic luck should be seen as an obstacle for defining knowledge. If one were to suggest adding a fourth condition to the JTB theory, it would only restrict what one may call knowledge.

Develop this point further.

I believe that the best definition of knowledge that has been put forth is that it is a *active* mental state, like perceiving and remembering, in the words of Williamson. He also describes it as a 'successful belief', which falls in line with the JTB theory. (Williamson, 2003)

I will further argue that the definition for knowledge should not be so restrictive. However, it should also be noted that our understandings of knowledge are not concrete: the world is in a constant state of flux, and we should be able to adapt our understandings of knowledge accordingly. I believe that, unlike Descartes and many philosophers before him, epistemically we should not be looking for certainty in our knowledge. Instead, we should be looking for probability. We should have a probabilistic account for knowledge, because we cannot always be certain whether our justified true beliefs count as knowledge. Which brings me to my next point: the JTB theory should not be abandoned. The JTB theory is a very good premise for what should be found in the search of knowledge. Firstly, the conditions are not impossible to attain, and knowledge should not be something that is extremely difficult to attain. Second, the only good definition of knowledge that has been put forth in more recent times is the one that has been put forth by Williamson about knowledge being a *active* mental state, but even the JTB theory still stands even with that definition being put forth. The Gettier cases only prove that we cannot have certainty about what is knowledge and what is merely belief.

'In the theory of knowledge, as in every other branch of science, we must think dialectically, that is, we must not regard our knowledge as ready-made and unalterable, but must determine how knowledge emerges from ignorance, how incomplete, inexact knowledge becomes more complete and more exact.' (Lenin, 1927)

Explain the aspects of the case - probability to achieve certainty

This quote by Lenin encapsulates how knowledge should be perceived, that is, as incomplete and inexact. Through our understanding of this it will become more apparent that certainty isn't a condition for knowledge, whereas truth may be. Lenin, following Hegel and Marx, advocates for dialectical thinking, by which we can account for contradictions and change over time. Something that is true today can be false tomorrow and vice versa, because the world is constantly changing and is in a state of flux. Thinking about knowledge dialectically may also be grasped through Hume's problem of induction: the future may not resemble the past, which is why many inductive inferences can be doubted and even undemonstratable. Some would argue that knowledge has to be certain in order for us to call it knowledge, but I would agree with Hume that certainty may only be attainable for deductive reasonings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are two chief problems that philosophers face when trying to provide a definition for knowledge: the first one I have discussed was a lack of certainty, and the second was a probabilistic issue. We've looked at how different philosophers approach scepticism, how they've utilized it in their search for either certainty or knowledge. We've also looked at the different definitions of knowledge that have been provided by philosophers. I put forth my case on why the JTB theory should not be overlooked in light of the Gettier cases. Another definition of knowledge that should not be overlooked is Williamson's definition of knowledge being a 'factive mental state'. Although I have stated previously that the definition of knowledge should not be so restrictive, I should reiterate that one cannot *know* something which is false; in that case it is merely a belief. The paper also compared Cartesian scepticism to Humean scepticism, in favour of the latter. Finally, although I agree with Hume's scepticism towards inductive inferences, and that we can never be certain of these inductive inferences, I still believe that our claims to knowledge do not rest on certainty, as long as they fit the tripartite JTB theory. The justified true belief conditions are sufficient conditions for the definition of knowledge, if one were to argue otherwise, then the second-best definition of knowledge is that it is a 'factive mental state'.

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