

Knowledge and Skepticism

What can we really know?



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

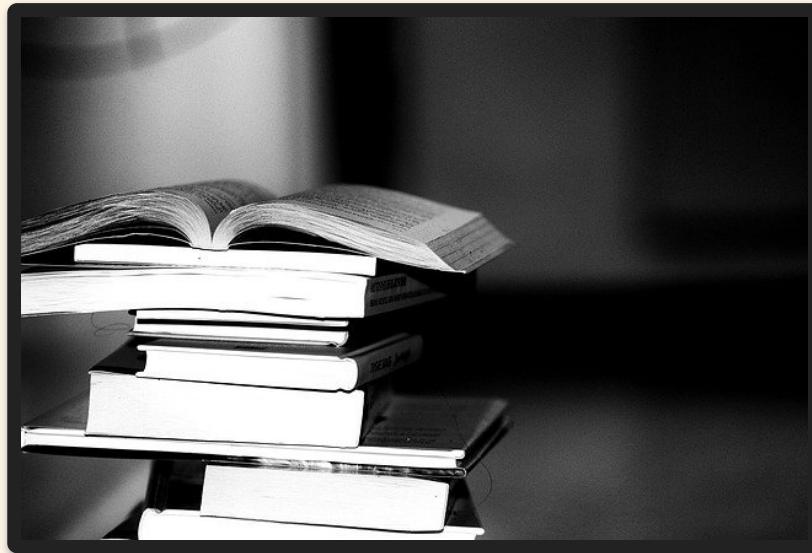
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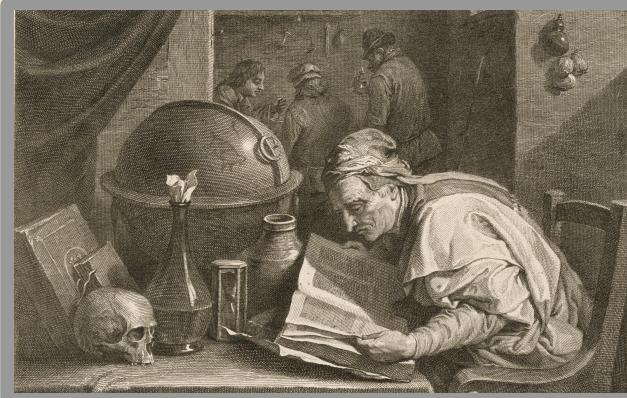
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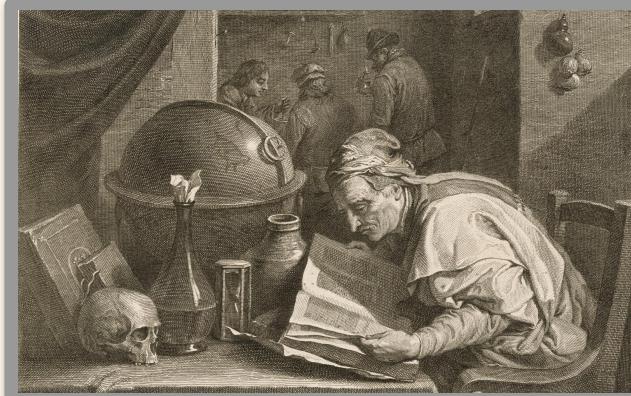
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- How can we know anything at all? This ancient philosophical question has troubled many people.

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- How can we know anything at all? This ancient philosophical question has troubled many people.
- First, note that knowledge is a state of mind, a type of *belief*. But there's more to knowledge than just belief.

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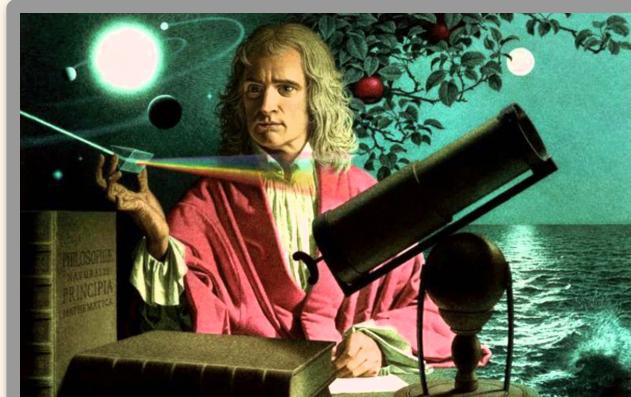
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- To count as knowledge our beliefs also have to be *true*.
- While it may be hard to figure out just what the facts are, simply believing something strongly is not enough to make it true or make it count as knowledge.

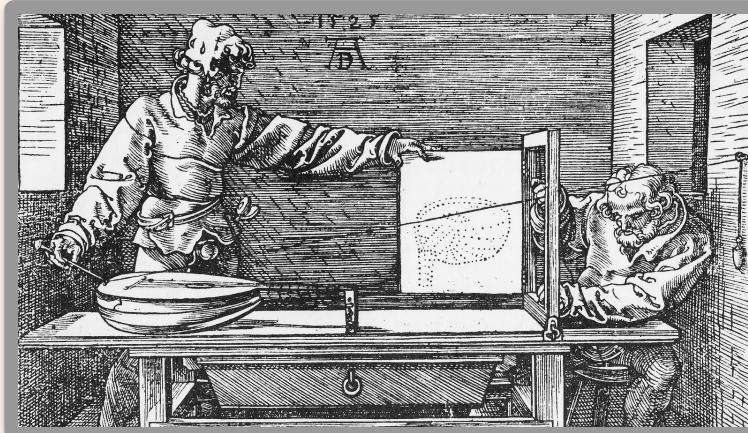
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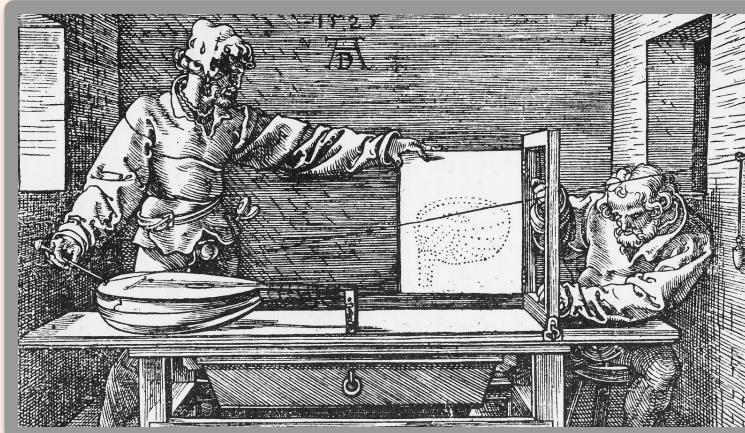
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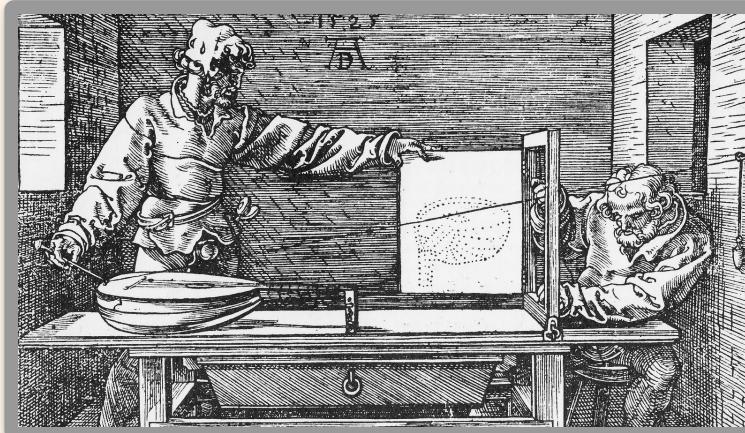
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- Finally we need *justification* for anything to really count as knowledge since knowledge is more than just lucky guessing.
- How we can justify our claims is one of the major concerns of epistemology or the philosophical theory of knowledge.

Epistemological questions

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- Or is all knowledge derived from sense experience like the **empiricists** claim?
- Or is knowledge a result of interactions between our ability to reason and what we get from experience as **constructivists** claim?

Epistemological questions



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- How can we tell whether or not we are living in a massive illusion, with the truth being quite different than what seems to be the case?
- What is the difference between healthy skepticism and unhealthy belief in vast conspiracies with little evidence?

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- Is scientific knowledge cumulative or does it undergo sudden changes or "paradigm shifts" from time to time?
- Why do so many people distrust and deny scientific findings?

Sources of justification

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Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza and Chomsky developed different rationalist theories of knowledge.

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Aristotle, Locke, Hume, and Wittgenstein developed different empiricist theories of knowledge.

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- The challenge for constructivists is that of figuring out from within our experience itself how our experience is constructed by our cognitive systems.

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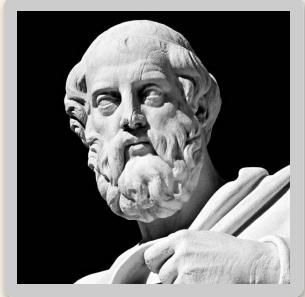
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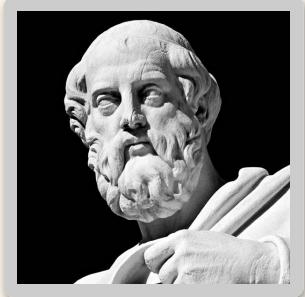
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Kant was a constructivist, as are many contemporary cognitive scientists.

Plato's Rationalism

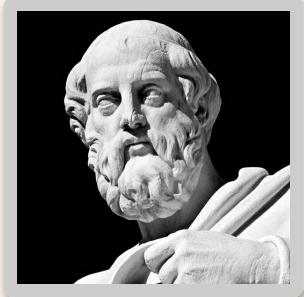


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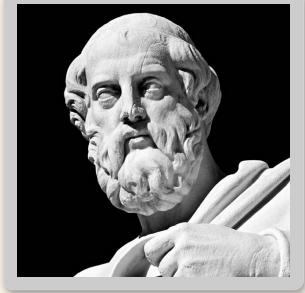
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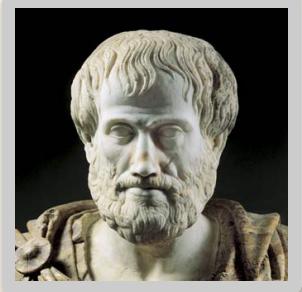
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Plato's conclusion

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*These concepts must be **innate**, somehow "written" in our souls before birth and coming to know them is more like remembering them than discovering or learning them.*

Aristotle's Empiricism

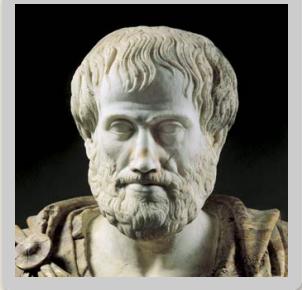


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Aristotle's theory of knowledge

!

*Knowledge results when the soul is **imprinted** by the sensible and intelligible forms of things in our experience, making a literal copy of them in our minds.*

Ancient Skepticism

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the ancient Skeptic Diogenes

Ancient Skepticism

Agrippa's argument against knowledge

Justifying beliefs might happen in three ways.

- **Foundationalism:** Belief A is justified by belief B and B is obviously true.
- **Infinite regress:** Belief A is justified by belief B, which is justified by C, and so on forever.
- **Circularity:** Belief A is justified by belief B, which is justified by belief C, which justifies belief A.

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- Why should we accept that **some** claims are obviously true and others must be justified?

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 - **Circularity:** Belief A is justified by belief B, which is justified by belief C, which justifies belief A.
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- If justification is a never-ending process is anything ever **really** justified?

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- If justification is circular like this, again we might ask why we should accept **anything** in this web of beliefs?

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- None of these options really works and there are no other ways we might justify our claims so we should suspend all judgement and never claim to know anything.

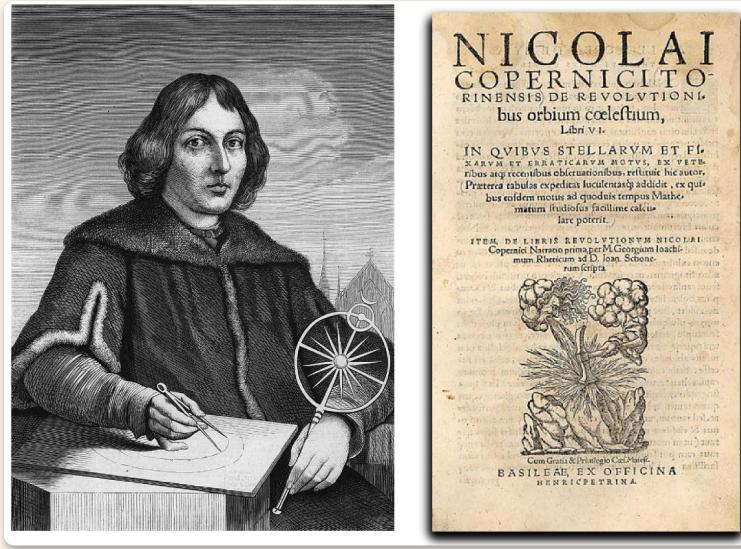
Science and Modern Philosophy

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Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543)

- Copernicus, Galileo and others claimed that the Earth was moving around the sun, but then why accept what they said and not the evidence of our senses or common sense?

Descartes' Rationalism



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Descartes' dream

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Can we ever tell from within our experience whether or not we are fundamentally deceived about the nature of reality? How can we tell whether we are dreaming that we are awake or really awake?

Locke's Empiricism



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Locke's puzzle

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How could we possibly learn everything we know starting from nothing in the space of a few years with relatively little input? Did you explicitly learn all of English grammar for example?

Hume's Skepticism

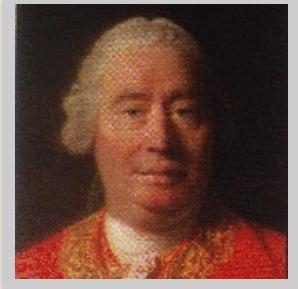


Hume's Skepticism



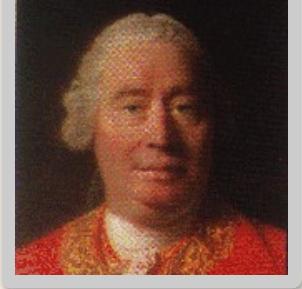
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Hume's unknowns

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Abstract concepts such as causation, truth, and goodness are meaningless, and science has no business saying what will happen in the future. But how could we get by with so little knowledge?

Kant's Constructivism



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Kant's compromise

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Philosophy must give up attempts to understand reality in itself and limit itself to understanding the structure of the world as we experience it and as science describes it.

Find out more



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