

Knowledge and Skepticism

What can we really know?



George Matthews, Pennsylvania College of Technology

2020

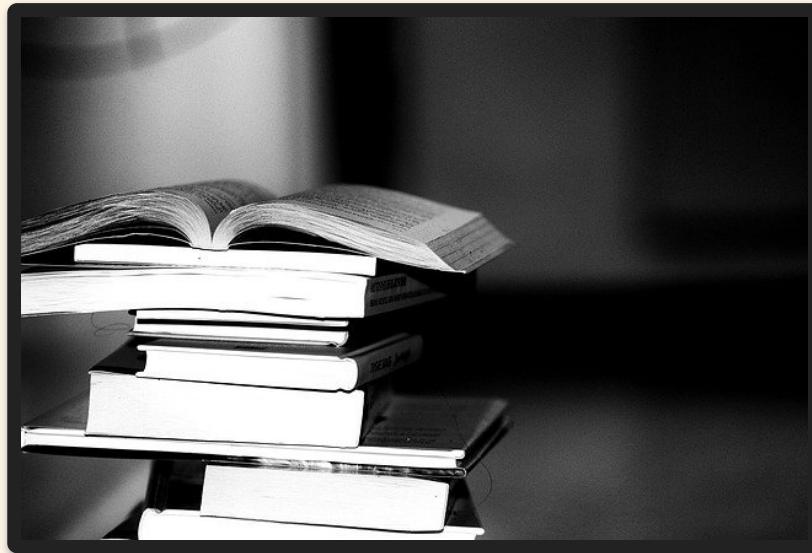
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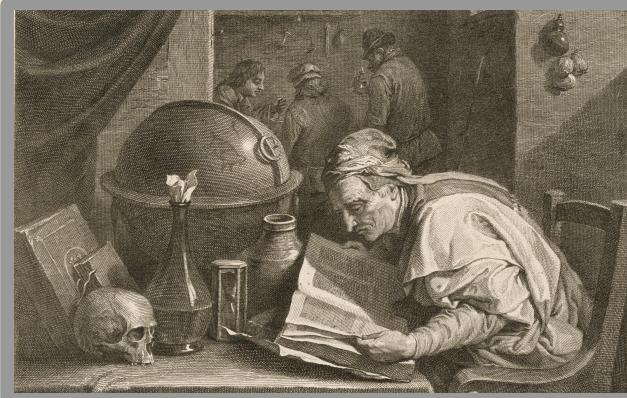
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- First, note that knowledge is a state of mind, a type of *belief*. But there's more to knowledge than just belief.

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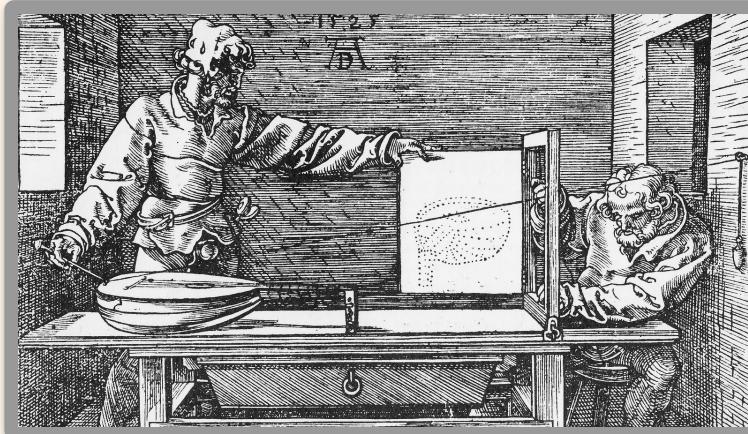
belief.



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- 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.

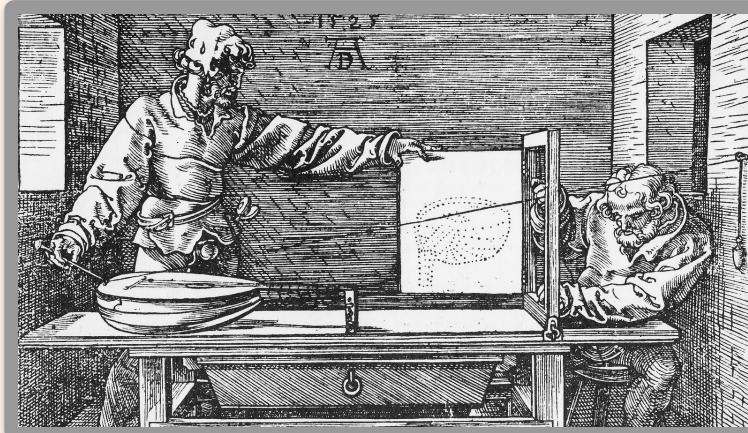
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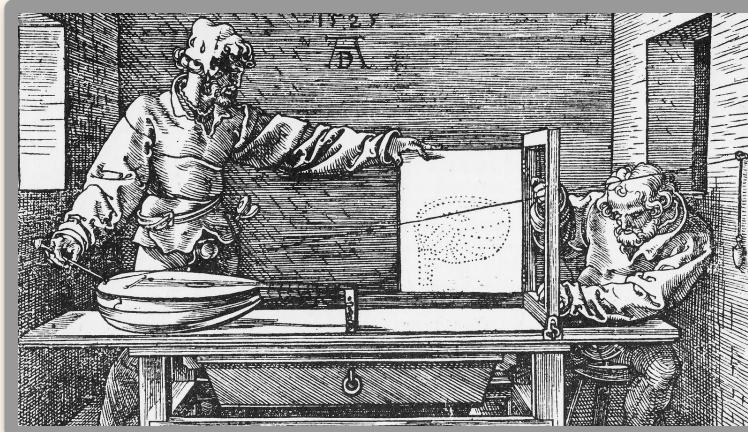
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- Finally we need *justification* for anything to really count as knowledge since knowledge is more than just lucky guessing.
- How we can justify our claims is one of the major concerns of epistemology or the philosophical theory of knowledge.

Epistemological questions

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- Or is all knowledge derived from sense experience like the empiricists claim?

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- Can we attain knowledge from our built-in ability to reason like the rationalists claim we can?
- 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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- 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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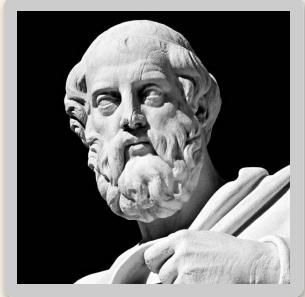
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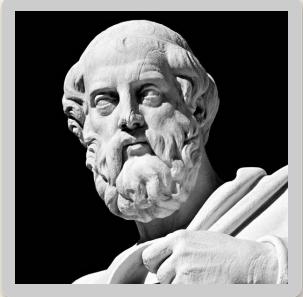
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Kant was a constructivist, as are many contemporary cognitive scientists.

Plato's Rationalism

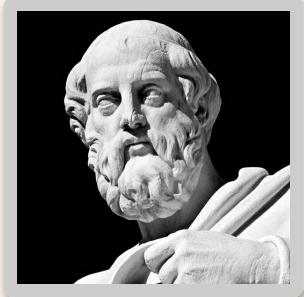


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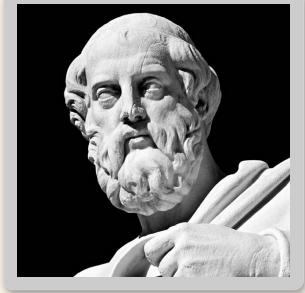
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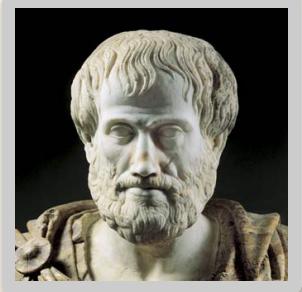
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Plato's conclusion

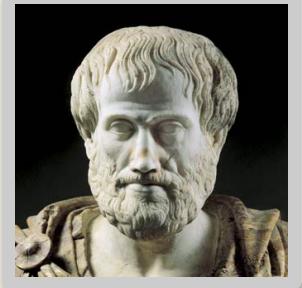
!

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

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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.

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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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 - Circularity: Belief A is justified by belief B, which is justified by belief C, which justifies belief A. **REALLY?**
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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.

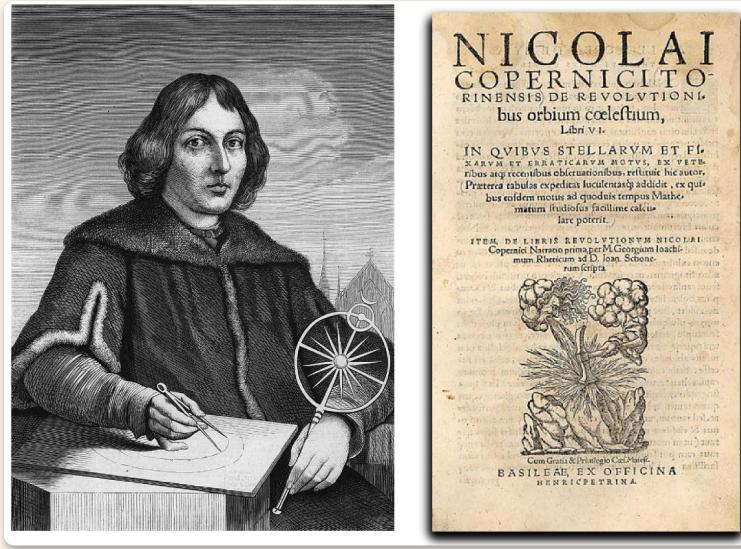
Science and Modern Philosophy

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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



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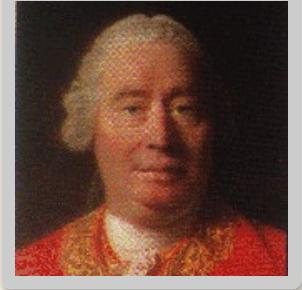
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Hume's unknowns

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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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