

Phi Lambda Phi: On Epistemology

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August 2025

Introduction: The Time Philosophy Changed the Whole World

A long time ago in Ancient Greece, many philosophers and, some would argue, the first scientists developed incredibly advanced ideas simply using the philosophical techniques spread at the time. You can imagine yourself learning a lot by dissecting abstract concepts all day, and then translating them back to the real world, which was the job of the scientist, or "natural philosopher", at the time.

Despite their progress, they frequently made mistakes. It's easy to imagine how they would believe the sun and all the other stars were very near the Earth, and moreover that the sun was not also a star, without NASA-level technology. So, it is also not surprising that among their beliefs was that the earth was the center of the universe, around which the stars, the sun, and the planets traversed, which is historically referred to as the "geocentric model". This was universally accepted everywhere, and even the most popular rebels of the time, e.g., Plato and Aristotle, actively worked to further develop this model on the precept that it was the correct vision of the universe.

There was only one who debated this long before Copernicus and his ordeals with the church: Aristarchus, still in ancient Greece. Nonetheless, he was rejected in favor of the theories of the far more popular Plato and Aristotle.

This story shows the dangers of *ethos*, or the excessive persuasiveness of one's character and the weight that they carry rather than their logic and reasoning, furthermore, it shows the importance of listening to arguments in their full capacity, even if they do go against our own; it is ironic that this was not practiced, at least in this situation, by the same people who heavily advocated these principles, and with this dangerous oversight, they were quick to change international perception of the world, at least for a moment.

Question: As much of a lesson on philosophical conduct as this is, it also begs a greater question... do we really know anything for certain?

Keep in mind that the arguments of all three figures, Plato, Aristotle, and Aristarchus, were mediocre at best, and none relied heavily on evidence (as was previously mentioned)

Empiricism: The Perception of Knowledge

Question: When acknowledging reality, can we always trust our senses? What are the differences between the sensations we can trust and the ones we can't, and thus, knowledge and deception?

When people think about the idea of knowledge, or rather, knowing something for certain, most people think about perceptual or empirical knowledge, or knowledge gained from our senses, e.g., we know the sky is blue because we can see that it is blue. This is why we can now say for certain today that the Earth, like the other planets in our solar system, travels around the Sun.

Perceptual knowledge is considered the type that is the most safeguarded from skepticism, or the disbelief in that knowledge, mainly by our shared knowledge of experiences. For example, I also know for certain that the sky is blue because other people also recognize the sky as being the color we all define to be blue.

Despite how it may seem, perceptual knowledge can also be deceiving and thus subject to skepticism. In Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Socrates describes a situation wherein a group of people are held fixed, facing forward in a cave lit by a dim fire, only to see passing shadows of a variety of figures. Socrates says that, should they have been there since the start of their lives, it would be unreasonable for them to believe that there is a world outside of the cave, and that there are beings besides the lifelike shadows cast on the cave wall. Yet there is a world beyond the cave, and there is life beyond these shadows, as we all know, and so they are living a life of lies, but they would never know because of the position they are in. In a way similar to this, we could be living a life of lies, simply because we do not have the mechanisms to look beyond the life we know and understand presently, just like the unfortunate case of Plato and Aristotle; we can only know so much from what we see.

Nonetheless, people who continue to argue that perception, regardless of whether or not it is true, is the only way of obtaining definite and undeniable knowledge. The people who hold, study, and argue this belief are aptly named empiricists.

Rationalism: The Conceptualization of Knowledge

Question: Think about things we can't see but know are real, specifically ideas and concepts (e.g., math, virtue). Can it be argued that these things are more timeless than the things we can see?

Whether or not we see something, we are constantly thinking. It seems to be human instinct to categorize something in the abstract rather than analyzing it for what it truly is, or rather what our senses tell us it is, simply because it is easier to do so; to rationalize something.

An unexpected byproduct of this situation is that these concepts seem to survive even when our knowledge of reality through perception has changed. Recall the debate of the geocentric model, despite Copernicus' discovery of evidence for the heliocentric model, this did not change the fact that all of the planets still orbited around something, no less the fact that the planets existed at all and that they existed in some sort of coordination; the idea of the "astrological system" survived.

There is a story that further exemplifies this concept called the Ship of Theseus, which describes a ship wherein all of its components are gradually replaced as they fail (think a floorboard being replaced when it creaks, or a mast being replaced as it is broken, or a sail being replaced when it is torn). The main question to pose from such an activity is as to whether or not the ship of Theseus is still the ship it once was, despite being entirely replaced by new components. To modernize this. To the new observer, this will just look like a new ship, but to someone who remembers the ship when it was in its war-torn state, they will associate the same concept of that war-torn ship with the new ship, and will thus properly recognize its identity.

The Ship of Theseus situation is a representation of the debate between empiricists, which we've heard of before, and rationalists, who believe that concepts are more real than what we see, simply because the things we see can change quite suddenly and rapidly, whereas we can continue to associate concepts with things despite this change. Again, even though recent news could come out that the sun is a special type of star that could explode much sooner than we thought it could before, it still does not change the fact that we knew that it was a star and that, at some point, it would explode; and so the truth to these arguments is much more sound than the truth to our current data. Like most things in philosophy, the superior epistemological idea, the superior theory of true knowledge, is up to the individual.

Skepticism: The Interpretation of Knowledge

Question: As much as it can be argued that conceptual knowledge is relatively stable, it is, in some regards, just as volatile as perceptual knowledge. Think about how concepts and perceptions can vary wildly among different individuals. What could this mean for the reliability of the two in terms of determining a definite truth?

The single greatest thing that Socrates (mind you, the same person who is also considered the greatest philosopher of all time) has ever said was "I know that I know nothing."

This was not Socrates admitting that he was a totally ignorant character; rather, he was admitting that he was ignorant of all other facts besides the *absolute fact* that certainty, and thus both senses and rationality, could not be trusted in totality. More specifically, he knew how concepts differed among people, just as how perception differed among generations, how where one could

see and identify a heart, another could identify a cloud, and ultimately, whoever would be the first to point it out would be in the right (Sound familiar? Recall the Plato versus Aristarchus argument.).

Going back to the Allegory of the Cave, Socrates further described a scenario wherein one of the captives was spontaneously released and left to roam around the cave. The others argued that his newfound freedom was pointless, since they firmly believed that there was nothing besides the shadows cast upon the wall, but the person who was freed saw the source of the shadows. Beyond this, they saw that they were in an enclosed environment, and that there was more to see outside, and so, they went outside and observed the Sun and nature. Finally, the freed person ventures back into the cave and attempts to explain the situation to those who are held, only for them to rebuke his claim in absolute disbelief. Socrates explains how the power of the majority, complacency, and the totality of some beliefs can even skew the totality of concepts, and thus, that these concepts were no better than their empirical concepts, even more so because they required, most times, an empirical basis. We are only human after all, and so, our mind can deceive us just as well as our eyes or our ears.

The aforementioned view is often called skepticism, and is the third and final major school of Epistemology. Epistemology remains a complex and greatly debated subject in philosophy, as is evident from the overview provided. In fact, it has been investigated and debated so much so that it has reached its current status, wherein there is no definite right or wrong perspective. Nonetheless, like all truths, that could very well change in the future.