PART IB PAPER 01
METAPHYSICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY

SYLLABUS

- Qualities: the primary and secondary distinction; response-dependence; dispositions.
- Metaphysics of modality: modal realism and alternatives.
- The nature of knowledge: externalism and internalism; theories of warrant and justification.
- Scepticism: the problem of scepticism and responses.
- Sources of knowledge: evidence; perception; a priori knowledge; testimony; induction.

COURSE OUTLINE

This course is compulsory for all students taking Part IB. It aims to develop students’ knowledge of metaphysics (building on Part IA, paper 1) and to introduce them to the central questions in epistemology, the theory of knowledge.

Metaphysics has traditionally been concerned with the most general aspects of reality. One broad topic on this paper is the nature of qualities. There is also a long tradition that has distinguished between ‘primary’ qualities, which are quite independent from us, and ‘secondary’ qualities, which are somehow more subjective and therefore mind-dependent. Another central debate concerns the nature of dispositions.

Another topic on this paper is the nature of modality: that is, possibility and necessity. Are necessities and possibilities genuine features of reality, or are they just dependent on how we think about reality?

The remaining topics on this paper are epistemological. One concerns the nature of knowledge itself. Knowledge has traditionally been understood as requiring justification or warrant or reason for belief. How should justification itself be understood? One debate here is about whether justification must have foundations, or whether it can consist in having a coherent system of beliefs. Another debate is about whether the justification for a belief requires that the knower be aware of this justification: ‘internalists’ say yes, ‘externalists’ say no.

Another epistemological topic is scepticism. Sceptical arguments aim to show that we do not have the knowledge we think we have. How should we respond to these arguments?

The third epistemological topic concerns the sources of our knowledge. Empirical knowledge is knowledge that is based on experience in some way; a priori knowledge is knowledge that is not so based. We also gain knowledge from the testimony of others and from induction. Each of these raise their own specific challenges.

Prerequisites

The course builds on material developed in paper 1 of IA and as such presupposes familiarity with the material covered there.

Objectives

Students taking this paper will be expected to:

1. Acquire a detailed knowledge of some of the concepts, positions and arguments in the central literature on the topics of the course.
2. Acquire some sense of how the positions on different topics relate to each other.
3. Engage closely and critically with some of the ideas studied.
4. Develop their ability to think independently about the topics covered.

Preliminary Reading

A useful introduction to some of the metaphysical topics of this paper is:


A useful introduction to epistemology is:


An excellent collection of reading is:

READING LIST

QUALITIES

The Primary and Secondary Distinction

Locke distinguishes between primary qualities, like shape and size and secondary qualities, like colour and sound. What is his argument for the distinction?

The original argument can be found in:

*LOCKE, John, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 2, ch. 8 'Some further considerations concerning our simple Ideas'.

See also:


For criticism by Berkeley, see:


For attempted reconstructions of Locke’s argument and discussion:


Dispositions

One important questions is whether we can analyse disposition ascriptions in terms of conditional statements.


Regress Problem

Another concerns whether all dispositions have causal bases.


Dispositions and their Ontology

For some further questions about the nature of dispositions, see:


ARMSTRONG, David, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chs. 3 & 4. Also available online at: https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511589308.


Response-Dependence

Response-dependent concepts are those whose extension is in some way essentially determined by human responses. Some have thought that colours are response-dependent. Are response-dependent properties less objective?


S.9, chs. 1 & 4. Also available online at: http://doi.org/10.1093/0198244142.001.0001


**THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE**

What is knowledge and how should we study it? Once central question is whether it is possible to give an account of knowledge in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.


**METAPHYSICS OF MODALITY**

Modal Realism and Alternatives

What is the nature of modality? For an overview over the philosophical terrain, see:

MELIA, Joseph, Modality (London: Acumen, 2003), chs. 4-7. Also available online at: http://lib.mylibrary.com/?id=292135.

Central debates concern the nature of possible world, the analysis of our modal concepts and whether we can give a fully reductive account of modal language.
Others have suggested that rather than trying to analyse the concept of knowledge, we should examine its function.


Yet others have suggested we study knowledge as a “natural kind”:


Virtue epistemologists argue that we should study knowledge by focussing on intellectual virtues:


Externalism and Internalism, Theories of Warrant and Justification

A central disagreement in epistemology concerns the nature of epistemic justification. Does justification depend only on an agent’s mental states or also on what is going on in the ‘external’ environment? A second, related dispute concerns whether we always have access to what justifies our beliefs.


*SCEPTICISM

The Problem of Scepticism

What is the best argument for scepticism?

*DESCARTES, René, Meditations on First Philosophy, Meditations 1 and 2. [Any edition]


http://www.jstor.org/stable/2024268
Responses to Scepticism

There are many different strategies for responding to scepticism. For a general overview, see:


Moorean responses:


*MOORE, G. E.,* Extracts From "Proof of an External World", "Four Forms of Scepticism" And "Certainty". In *SOSA.*


Dogmatist responses:


Contextualist responses:


Denying closure:


Inference to the best explanation:


SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

Evidence

What is the nature of evidence? Can disagreement be a source of evidence?


Perception


BYRNE, Alex, and HEATHER LOGUE, eds., *Disjunctivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009). Also available online at: www.dawsonera.com. [Introduction and essays by Martin, Snowdon and Hinton]


A Priori Knowledge

A *priori* knowledge is knowledge that is in some sense independent of sense experience. But what exactly does this "independence" amount to? And do we have any a *priori* knowledge?


*KANT, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Introduction I-IV.


Testimony


*HUME, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (1748 or any edition), sect. X.


*LACKEY, Jennifer, ‘It Takes Two to Tango: Beyond Reductionism and Non-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony’, in J. Lackey and E. Sosa,
Induction


*HUME, David, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Part IV. Also available online at: http://lib.myilibrary.com/?id=116084.

For discussion of whether deduction suffers from the same kinds of difficulties as induction see:


Classical induction is now frequently subsumed under the broader notion of inference to the best explanation. For an introduction to this see:


RUSSELL, Bertrand, The Problems of Philosophy (London: Williams and Norgate, 1912), chs. 6 & 7. Also available online at: http://www.wmcarey.edu/crockett/russell/.
