**Class notes**

I taught two, two-hour seminars called “Introduction to Epistemology.” I promised my students that I would provide a brief overview of class here. Since my two seminars were more or less the same, I’m going to do a single write-up for both sections. Note that not all of the discussion occurred in the order that I am presenting here.

I’m sorry if I forgot to include anybody’s comments—I’m working mostly from memory and trying to keep my notes to a reasonable length.

**Part 1: Do we know things?**

I put the question to the class: do we know things? Students went to one side of the class if they answered, “yes,” and the other side of the class if they thought “no.” Working in groups, each side needed to attempt to convince the other side that they were wrong.

Students who answered “yes” pointed out that we can “verify” our beliefs by comparing them with the way the external world behaves. They pointed out that we can know things about own internal states, for examples, we can know what we believe. They pointed out that we have made great technological advances and that one way to explain this is by positing that we have increased our knowledge about the world. They pointed out that we have knowledge of certain kinds of skills, such as riding a bike or doing arithmetic, and that many of our instincts, such as a baby crying when her stomach hurts, seem to count as knowledge.

We also briefly talked about whether or not the “no” position, that we *don’t* know anything, is self-undermining. These students worried that if we knew that we don’t know anything, then we would have one piece of knowledge: namely, that we don’t know anything. But if we know that we don’t know anything, then it’s false that we don’t know anything. We do know something. This is a paradox.

In response, we worried whether the person who answers “no” is actually committed to the claim that we don’t know that we know anything.

Students who answered “no” pointed out that it seems impossible to prove that our perception is reliable. They pointed to cases of hallucination and delusion, as well as cases in which our emotions cause us to have false perceptions, to motivate the claim that sometimes our perceptions are inaccurate. They worried that it was possible that in all cases, our perceptions might be inaccurate.

Other students worried that that if we genuinely knew things, then we would know that we would know them. But it seems like we don’t know that we know things. In fact, it’s an open question whether we know things at all. So we don’t know anything.

Finally, some students brought up the fact that we can’t make scientific theories without making some assumptions at some point. These assumptions are not themselves knowledge. This suggests that any beliefs derived from these assumptions are not knowledge either, because these beliefs are ill founded (justified, see below).

**Part 2: The brain in the vat or evil demon scenario**

We then considered a thought experiment. Let’s say that Satan exists, and that he loves to create falsehood and darkness. Satan has a bunch of brains (us), which he hooks up to electrodes and causes to have experiences of a fully-fledged world.

Virtually everyone agreed that we cannot exclude the possibility that the brain in the vat scenario (BiV) is true. Some students worried about whether or not Satan would allow us to wonder about whether we’re brains in vats. We mostly agreed that Satan might indeed allow us to wonder about whether we’re brains in vats, because Satan is trying to amuse himself or because Satan likes watching us suffer in philosophy classroom or for some other imaginable reason.

The main question we asked ourselves about the BiV scenario was whether it undermined our ability to possess ordinary, everyday knowledge: knowledge like, “There’s a chair in this classroom,” or “I’m holding a scarf.”

(Here we introduced a distinction between global skepticism, skepticism about the possibility of any knowledge, and local skepticism, skepticism about knowledge in certain domains. I wrote the BiV argument so that it is an argument in favor of local skepticism. This allowed us to sidestep the paradox discussed in part 1, as well as issues involving beliefs about the self and beliefs abou concepts.)

We considered a short formalization of this argument:

P1. I don’t know whether or not I’m in a BiV scenario.

P2. Either I know that I’m not in a BiV scenario, or I don’t have ordinary knowledge.

C. Therefore, I don’t have ordinary knowledge.

Most of us agreed that the argument looks correct, but that something must be wrong with it, because C is surely false! So, what’s wrong with it?

We spent most of our energy attacking (P2). Some students said that whether or not I’m a brain in the vat, it seems like I do know that, “There’s a chair in this classroom,” because my hallucination of the chair suffices to make, “There’s a chair in this classroom” true. We then worried that there were some ordinary beliefs, like “I have hands,” that were obviously false in a BiV scenario and so shouldn’t seem to count as knowledge.

Some of us also wondered whether there was a meaningful distinction between “acting as if we know p” and “knowing p.” If we act as if we know that there’s a chair in front of us, and certain other conditions hold (for example, it’s true—in some sense—that there’s a chair in front of us), then we can still know that there’s a chair in front of us, crucially, even if we are in a BiV scenario.

We eventually lost steam on this question because we felt that we needed a good definition of knowledge before we could evaluate the BiV argument.

**Part 3: The definition of knowledge**

This was the most contentious section of the class. Depending upon which section you came to, we considered two or three questions:

1. Does knowledge require truth?
2. Does knowledge require justification?
3. Can testimony transmit justification? [2:35 pm section only]

Surprisingly, against the philosophical orthodoxy, at least half of the students in both classes thought that truth was not required for knowledge. Students who felt that truth was not required for knowledge believed that knowing p is just believing that p with a certain strength of conviction. They brought up cases like Newton “knowing” certain facts about gravity. Though these facts turned out to be false, they felt that it was implausible to say that Newton doesn’t know them.

These students also worried that requiring truth for knowledge set the bar for knowledge too high. They distinguished between certainty, which required truth, and knowledge, which did not. They argued that the BiV argument from Part 2 established that we can’t know things with certainty, but no that we can’t know things.

Against this, many students argued that truth is what separates knowledge from belief. When we think we know something, and later find out that our belief was false, we say that we never actually knew that belief.

Our discussion of the second question opened with a scenario:

[10:35 section] I believe (truly) that paper is made from trees. I believe this because I believe that trees have spirits, which want to help humans. Periodically, the tree spirits shoot paper airplanes from holes in the trees, which people from the paper factory pick up, smooth out, and package as paper. Do I know that paper is made from trees?

[2:35 section] I believe (truly) that the earth is round. I believe this because I believe that a giant, animate stuffed Teddy bear shaped the earth out of a ball of clay. Do I know that the earth is round?

Students who did not believe that knowledge required truth were inclined to say that I did know these true beliefs, either because I believed it with a certain degree of conviction or because I had a theory to back up my beliefs.

Students who did not think that I knew these beliefs appealed to the fact that I formed these beliefs in an incorrect way. I said that “justified belief” was a fancy way for saying “beliefs formed in the correct way for knowledge.”

Some students who believed that I did know that the earth is round were inclined to say that true beliefs that happened to pop into my head didn’t count as knowledge. This suggests that they were inclined to believe that knowledge requires justification but disagreed with their peers over whether I had justification in the paper and earth cases.

The 2:35 section also debated the following scenario. Suppose an expert on particle physics tells me that protons are made of quarks. Do I know that there are quarks? In other words, is my true belief about quarks justified?

Students who answered “no” pointed out that testimony often isn’t reliable. Some of them argued that in this case, because I was told by an expert, I had justification, but that testimony in general doesn’t transmit belief.

Students who answered “yes” pointed to the fact that lots of what we intuitively know is told to us by other people.