EPISTEMOLOGY
The Philosophical Investigation of Knowledge

In the previous section we struggled with the question, “what is Philosophy?” We answered the question by examining the etymology of the word, the historical context in which it began, and then by examining three paradigmatic philosophers from three different historical periods. In this section we’re going to examine Philosophy by taking a closer look at one of the academic subdisciplines of Philosophy: Epistemology.

The term ‘epistemology’, like many of the technical terms in the discipline is derived from the Greek language; in this case, ‘logos’ and ‘episteme’. *Logos* is a Greek term that can be rendered “argument”, or “account” or “explanation”, or “theory”. *Episteme* is best translated “knowledge” in this context, though as we discovered in Plato’s *Defense of Socrates* that it has a more precise connotation in Greek. So, for the purpose of our investigation we’ll take ‘epistemology’ in its literal sense of “theory of knowledge”.

At the heart of Epistemology there is a core of three basic questions:

1. What *is* knowledge?
2. Can we *have* knowledge?
3. How do we *get* knowledge?

As you will find throughout this course we always begin by defining our terms so we can avoid equivocating (i.e., applying different meanings to the same term in a single context), thus the first question is simply exploring the nature of knowledge and what makes it distinct from other cognitive states like belief, hunch, hope, reflection, opinion and so on.

Once we’ve established a working definition of ‘knowledge’ we can proceed to examine the second question: is it possible for finite beings like humans to actually achieve knowledge? Here we’ll find a disagreement among different philosophers. Some will argue that we can never reach a state of certainty in regard to our beliefs and therefore fail to have knowledge. These skeptics are opposed by philosophers who think we can achieve certainty, if not in regard to all our beliefs, at least to some degree. As we’ll see with both skeptics and dogmatists (i.e., those who think we can have knowledge) there is a continuum of positions from absolute skepticism (no one can know anything) on one extreme to absolute dogmatism (anybody can know everything) on the other.

Of course, the burden of proof falls on those who make a positive claim, so the dogmatists owe us an explanation of *how* we can actually go about getting knowledge. Here again we’ll see that there is disagreement among philosophers. Fortunately, from the many different theories of knowledge put forward over the last two millennia, there are significant similarities that allow us to group dogmatic theories into two main groups: Rationalism and Empiricism. In order to get a better sense of these two approaches to how knowledge might be attained, we’ll look at four paradigmatic philosophers, two rationalists and two empiricists, who exemplify these two very different approaches.