

David Hilbert

January 6, 2012

Teaching epistemology

Epistemology is unteachable

Epistemology is a standard part of the introductory curriculum at every level. It has also been a central part of philosophy for a very long time which (partially) justifies making it a part of the introductory curriculum. Epistemology has long been one of the more technical areas of philosophy with a highly developed theoretical apparatus and lots of proprietary jargon. The jargon alone presents serious obstacles to the uninitiated and starts with the name of the subject itself. Although “epistemology” is often softened to “theory of knowledge” in introductory contexts, it inevitably reemerges with the inevitable use of “epistemic” to qualify various other bits of jargon like the very special use of “justify” that is inescapable in philosophical discussion.

This much is usual in philosophy and it is the job of the teacher to avoid using terms like “closure,” “factive,” “defeater” and the like and to explain them clearly if they are unavoidable. Where epistemology especially suffers is in its unfortunate reliance on the standard analysis of knowledge as justified true belief and the even more unfortunate centrality of this analysis to much of the 20th century literature. Although the especially clever (and geeky) among our students may enjoy playing this game, most of them (and many of our colleagues outside of epistemology) don’t know the point of the slogan --Knowledge is justified true belief!-- and, without some attachment to the slogan, it is very difficult to drum up interest in discussions of Gettier problems and their avoidance. It’s not that the slogan is false (although it very well may be) but rather that our students don’t know what they are supposed to do with it once we’ve browbeaten them into admitting its truth. And once we get on to discussions of the travel plans of Brown and the mysteries of fake barn country, even professionals might be forgiven for sometimes wondering why anyone who is not a professional philosopher should care about the analysis of knowledge and the attendant literature.

Of course, there are other ways to teach epistemology that don’t involve justified true belief and Gettier. It’s common to approach the subject historically and, for those students who have the requisite reading skills, this can be a useful way to begin the discussion of epistemic issues. Questions of motivation still persist, however, and the unfortunate truth is that there are students who aren’t convinced that that it’s valuable to understand Plato or even Descartes. For those difficult cases, it can be hard work to get them to care about the ruminations of some long dead guy who presents himself sitting around in a dressing gown obsessing about certainty and getting all wrought up over the melting of a piece of wax.

We could also begin with a discussion of perception, and in some ways this is more promising. Even here, however, the temptation is overwhelming to move with great rapidity to discussions of direct vs indirect realism and, although it pains me to admit it, there are more than

a few students who really don't understand why it matters whether our awareness of the external world is by means of sense-data or not. In all of these cases, the difficulty is that those of us who are doing the teaching do speak the language and do care about these issues -- which makes it difficult for us to put ourselves in the position of those who are the intended recipients of our wisdom.¹

Epistemology is inescapable

These are problems, however, with the way epistemology is often taught, not with the subject itself. Epistemology itself is something that, without knowing the word, is already a part of the lives of our students. By this I don't mean that our students know or don't know a great many things. Rather I mean that they are already interested in, and have devoted time and effort to understanding, questions about the nature of knowledge and how to evaluate knowledge claims. Most of this effort is applied specifically and fairly narrowly, rather than abstractly and generally in the manner of philosophical discussions. Students are more likely to have worried about the proper interpretation of baseball statistics than about reliabilist theories of justification -- but this doesn't make them that different from philosophers who go on at length about the problem of other minds. Even this is more abstract than many of our epistemic concerns which often take the very concrete form of deciding whether something that someone has said is to be relied or not.

But even when it comes to the question of whether to trust the testimony of a specific person offered at a specific time about a specific subject, our students are likely to be theorists to some degree. It would be an unusual person who had never reflected more generally on how to tell when someone is sincere or authoritative or, at the very least, on the question of how to tell when Dave is making it up as opposed to those cases where he knows what he is talking about. The fact that epistemological reflection is an almost inevitable part of lives in our world gives us, as teachers, a way to try to grab our students' interest. This isn't an argument for teaching applied epistemology -- leave that to the sabremetricians and social psychologists. I'm suggesting that by starting with discussion of epistemological issues that are prominent in the lives of our students, we can get them interested in the much more abstract discussions that philosophers are equipped to contribute to.

Old reliable

There is one common and plausible way to interest students in epistemic questions that doesn't fit with the idea that we should start with situations that arise out of ordinary experience. Global skepticism about perception leading to skepticism about the external world is a venerable and often successful way of interesting some of our students in epistemic questions. The considerations that give rise to skepticism are simple and easy to explain and also multitudinous. It doesn't really matter much whether the discussion revolves around all-powerful evil demons, vats full of brains, the Matrix, or whatever skeptical scenario grabs the teacher's (and students') fancy. Some students, with some justice, may feel that the discussion is excessively academic in the pejorative sense, but many others will enter into the spirit of the exercise and find surprisingly clever ways of refuting any attempts to rebut the skeptical arguments.

¹ If those teaching don't speak the language and, more importantly, don't care about the issues then there are even more serious pedagogical problems that I won't attempt to address here.

The problem with this technique for engaging students with epistemology is that it's success is almost entirely negative. Once you've convinced your students that they know nothing, it's very hard to move them back to any non-skeptical position. Part of the problem is that although many skeptical arguments are very intuitively plausible and require little background to motivate, the responses to skepticism are often intuitively implausible and appeal to sophisticated bits of philosophical theory. I have managed to convince a few students to take the First Meditation seriously, but I doubt I have managed to convince any of them to engage seriously with the rest of the book. The skeptical arguments appear to require no more than some reflection on the nature of sensory experience while the reply to skepticism requires difficult feats of philosophy, like proving the existence of God. Although skepticism motivates many students, it doesn't seem to lead them to appreciate the rest of epistemology.

Testimony

During my commute to work, I change trains at a station frequently used by tourists. As I stand and wait for my train, I am asked for directions with surprising frequency. I'm usually able to answer and the inquirers thank me and, as far as I can tell, usually follow my advice. I think we would often even say that tourists, after being informed by me, know the routes to their destinations. This is such an ordinary transaction that it seems odd to call attention to it. Yet it is an example of one person, lost in a large city, asking another, whom he or she has never seen before and will never see again, for information and then, with no apparent qualms, acting on the basis of that advice.

I am, in fact, on questions of that kind, pretty well-informed and generally truthful and sincere in what I say. Yet the confused tourist is in no position to know or reasonably believe such things of me. It may be that there is some reason to think that people in general are reliable on such issues in such circumstances, but the statistics seem quite difficult to formulate in a helpful way. Here we have a very interesting set of issues that seems to call out for a philosophical analysis. We have no alternative to relying on the testimony of others if we are to learn the things we need to know to act successfully in our daily lives. Yet we often lack the kind of knowledge of the reliability of our sources that would seem to be necessary given the trust we put in them. It's also obvious that we shouldn't always trust others so we need some account of when not to trust as well. This is a practical problem that should resonate with our students that nevertheless forces engagement with some fundamental issues of epistemology.² Interestingly, even quite young children learn from testimony and distinguish between different cases in the amount of trust they bestow (Harris et al. 2006). In all of these cases, issues of justification, truth, evidence and the like come up quite naturally. The idea is not that we should be aiming at making our students better evaluators of testimony, but rather that examples involving testimony can serve to motivate our students to care about epistemic theory in a way that the more contrived skeptical examples above may not.

A closely related issue is what has come to be called the novice-expert problem which concerns the question of how to evaluate the testimony of experts when one is not expert oneself. This, again, is an absolutely unavoidable problem in the modern world and one that leads quite

² The classic source for discussions of testimony in the modern era is Thomas Reid, especially in the *Enquiry* (1764/1872). The contemporary literature was surprisingly thin until the last fifteen years or so but some influential sources are (Coady 1992; Burge 1993, 1997; Goldman 2001; Lackey 2008). With the possible exception of the Goldman none of these are really suitable for introductory students.

naturally into fundamental epistemology. Given the centrality of this problem to contemporary life, this is one area in which I am frequently tempted to do some actual applied philosophy. Although this doesn't help teach epistemic theory, I often include a segment in my classes on how to read science journalism. A surprisingly large number of otherwise quite good students treat science journalism with a more or less random mixture of misplaced credulity and unmotivated skepticism.

Problem driven philosophy teaching

The message is that philosophy for beginners is better approached by beginning with problems -- not philosophical problems as they are usually conceived of, but questions that arise out of day-to-day activities and that all of us, philosophers or not, have to grapple with on a day-to-day basis. Epistemology is boring (for students) when it is an exercise in unmotivated analysis that leads to a set of very abstract concepts and theories with no discernible connection to our lives. Starting with the concrete and real needn't mean that we never proceed to the more theoretical issues that occupy the bulk of the literature in epistemology but it does mean that we can't start with the theories without giving them some meaning in terms of activities our students understand and care about. We can still discuss important epistemic ideas including all of the usual ones: evidence, justification, the structure of justification, epistemic entitlement, closure, knowledge et al. We just can't assume that our students will care about these ideas just because we tell them to. We need to help them see why they matter and that means grounding in them in ordinary life.

Irresponsible teaching

I have been a very responsible teacher for most of my career. I carefully make sure that my students, at every level, are exposed to all of the important approaches to the philosophical topics that I cover. I have always been very worried that they might finish the class without being introduced to all of the important ideas in an area and will rush through topics to prevent this. I mean well but a large proportion of my students finish my classes bored and baffled. They like me since I'm an engaging lecturer but they don't like what I'm teaching.

I think this is probably not a problem in upper level classes populated by philosophy majors. For students getting their first exposure to philosophy, it's a huge mistake. Introductory students don't need a comprehensive knowledge of epistemology. It's no tragedy if they finish an intro course without having been exposed to contextualism or Hume's problem of induction. Our goal is to introduce them to philosophy, not prepare them for graduate school, and we will have fulfilled our goal if we give them a little bit of knowledge and a few tools for thinking about philosophical issues.

In other words we should be irresponsible teachers. If we can engage our students in philosophy and keep them engaged, it doesn't matter if our coverage of theoretical possibilities is less than comprehensive. What we want to give them is the idea that there are systematic ways of addressing interesting problems that every human being has to confront. In other words, keep them interested and slip them as much theory as you can but don't worry if it's not all you might desire. This won't come naturally to me: I'm a theorist by both inclination and training and don't need any real life motivation. But to the extent I can change my classes to be more engaging (even if less comprehensive), I'll be doing a better job of introducing young people to philosophy.

Bibliography

- Burge, T. (1993). Content preservation. *Phil. Rev.* 102(4): 457-88.
- Burge, T. (1997). Interlocution, perception, and memory. *Phil. Stud.* 86(1): 21-47.
- Coady, C. A. J. (1992). *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Goldman, A. I. (2001). Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust? *Phil. Phenom. Res.* 63(1): 85-110.
- Harris, P. L., E. S. Pasquini, et al. (2006). Germs and angels: the role of testimony in young children's ontology. *Developmental Science* 9(1): 76-96.
- Lackey, J. (2008). *Learning From Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Reid, T. (1764/1872). Inquiry into the Human Mind. In: *The Works of Thomas Reid, DD*, Ed. W. Hamilton. Vol. 1. Edinburgh, Maclachlan and Stewart.