

Smoky Mountain Bible Institute

Philosophy 102 Epistemology

As we begin our walk through Philosophy, I am going to try to break it up into bite-sized chunks to make it a little more understandable. Let's start with *epistemology*. So, in good Lutheran fashion... "What does this mean?"

The word "epistemology" comes from the Greek "*episteme*" (knowledge), and "*logos*" (words/study of). So, epistemology is "the study of, or words about, knowledge"; more specifically, the nature and scope of knowledge. Epistemology examines what knowledge *is*, how it can be acquired, and the extent to which it is pertinent to any given subject or entity. Epistemology is about issues having to do with the creation and dissemination of knowledge in particular areas of inquiry. We can thank Scottish philosopher James Frederick Ferrier for coining the term.

Defining Knowledge is a tricky thing, as we can see in this quote from Donald Rumsfeld from a number of years back. "...*there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns -- the ones we don't know we don't know.*" But defining knowledge epistemologically is actually a little bit easier.

There is a large list of words associated with any specialized area of study including psychology, but at the risk of oversimplifying it, I will break it into four general categories and try to avoid using lot of jargon. The four categories are:

- Knowledge that we have, that has been verified or justified.
- Knowledge which explains how that justified knowledge functions.
- Knowledge of a person, place or thing.
(These first three are defined by some as Knowledge that, Knowledge how, and Knowledge of)
- Skepticism. (Which, in essence, calls into question the existence and validity of the process that postulates the above three categories, and is one of the first of many "isms" contained in psychology.)

Maybe an example will help us get our minds around this topic. We can have the *first* kind of knowledge about any simple mathematical formula (like $2+2=4$). Understanding how addition works, to provide this verified piece of knowledge would be knowledge of the *second* type. Knowing how to bake a cake or a build a bookcase or drive a car would also fit into this *second* category. However knowing a mathematician who taught you how to do this math or the place of education, or for that matter, anyone, or any place you are acquainted with is knowledge of the *third* type. For further example let's look at driving a vehicle:

- Knowledge that people can drive vehicles.
- Knowledge of how to drive a vehicle.
- Knowledge of a driver and a vehicle, and a road on which to drive it.

The final category is not really an area or type of knowledge as much as it is an assumption or process. *Skepticism* questions the validity of some or all human knowledge. Skepticism does not apply to one specific type of philosophy; rather it is a thread that runs through many philosophical discussions of epistemology. The first well known skeptic was Socrates who claimed that his only knowledge was that he knew nothing with certainty. Descartes most famous inquiry into mind and body also began as an exercise in skepticism. He began by questioning the validity of all knowledge and looking for some fact that was irrefutable; in so doing, came to his famous dictum: "*I think, therefore I am.*"

I find it interesting that the Greek word mentioned earlier for knowledge has the same root as the Greek word for faith or belief. When we as Christians speak of salvation, our faith exists only because the Holy Spirit enlightens us. However, there are also many good forms of epistemological knowledge which we can also refer to when presenting that faith to others. For example, while I cannot claim to have first-hand knowledge of my Savior, I can point to reliable first-hand biblical accounts. I can also point to a half-dozen other reliable historical accounts that confirm Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be and did what He said He would do. While

I may not fully know *how* Christ suffered and died for me I can still know that He did. You do not have to know how to drive to know that people *can* drive. We can certainly be acquainted with many people, places and things that serve to affirm and strengthen our faith. But finally, we must always be ready to answer the skeptic. As Paul says in His first letter to Peter, “be ready to give an answer for the hope that you have”. Next Lesson: metaphysics.