

Epistemic Particularism

“I saw...bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal...convex equatorial deserts and each of their grains of sand...a woman in Inverness whom I shall never forget; I saw her tangled hair, her tall figure, the cancer in her breast; I saw in a closet in Alkmaar a terrestrial globe between two mirrors that multiplied it endlessly; I saw horses with flowing manes on a shore of the Caspian Sea at dawn...the delicate bone structure of a hand...the survivors of a battle sending out picture postcards...the slanting shadows of ferns on a greenhouse floor...tigers, pistons, bison, tides, and armies...all the ants on the planet...I saw my own face and my own bowels; I saw your face; and I felt dizzy and wept, for my eyes had seen that secret and conjectured object whose name is common to all men but which no man has looked upon – the unimaginable universe...” (Borges, “The Aleph”)

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Te Whare Hāngai o Hīkato

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- Virtue ethics' recent (>1950s) challenge to mainstream ethics contains many dimensions and opposing theories.
- However many virtue ethicists hold in common a tendency towards greater *holism* and *contextualism* in ethics. This includes:
 - i. Shifting focus of ethics from evaluating *acts* (considered in some abstract sense) to evaluating *whole persons*. (C.f. *character* – a concept arguably neglected by mainstream ethics)
 - ii. Broadening exclusive focus on *thin ethical concepts* (good/bad, right/wrong), to consider *thick ethical concepts* (kind, brave, patient...), which insofar as they might combine in 'nonlinear' ways, require nuanced discussion.

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- Part of this broadening is to call into question the very ***role of moral philosophy*** as explicating the nature of ***moral obligation*** ('ought')
- Too often, virtue ethicists claim, this exclusive focus leads ethicists to view the ultimate aim of moral philosophy as developing a kind of ***action validation calculus***
- Some virtue ethicists question whether the notion of moral obligation even makes sense: “**emphasizing responsibility and holding people to account for their actions reflects a distorted [legalistic] perspective that taking virtues seriously can help us to overcome**” (Hookway, 2003)

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- What other role might moral philosophy have?

One suggestion: imparting *useable insights* regarding how to regulate one's life as a whole:

- E.g. **Aristotelian framework**: moral knowledge does not really consist in *knowledge of what are good acts so that one can do as many of those good acts as possible*.
- This disregards the *motives* with which acts are done, which is arguably crucial.
- More useful moral knowledge concerns how to *balance out a number of heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting character traits* to create a harmonious personality, and thus life.

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- Dancy does not cite virtue ethics as an inspiration for his view, which he claims to have developed himself over the past 25 years.
- But the view is very congenial regarding virtue ethics' demand for greater *holism* and *contextualism* in ethics.
- Dancy's **definition of generalism**:
 - ❖ a given feature of a situation makes the same moral difference in all cases
- Dancy's **definition of particularism**:
 - ❖ a feature "can make one moral difference in one case and a different difference in another" (Dancy, 2009). Features have **variable relevance**

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- As a paradigmatic generalist, consider **Ross' theory of *Prima Facie Duties***.
- This theory sets out to define a basic list of features of situations that serve as 'contributory' moral reasons in set ways. E.g.:
 - ❖ that an act has the feature '**involves lying**' is always some reason not to perform it, even if that reason is outweighed in a particular situation by, for instance, the feature '**saves a person's life**'
 - ❖ that an act has the feature '**ends a person's life**' is always *some reason not* to perform it
 - ❖ that an act has the feature '**is kind**' is always *some reason to* perform it (*... and so on*)

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- Dancy asks why we should assume this always holds. In the right context:
 - ❖ that an act has the feature **'is kind'** might be precisely a reason *not* to do it:
 - (e.g. one is faced with a person who continually **presumes on one's kindness**, one is tired of going the extra mile for this person and feels they should be broken of the habit)
 - ❖ that an act has the feature **'ends a person's life'** might be precisely a reason *to* do it:
 - (e.g. assisting a voluntary **euthanasia** which will prevent untold suffering)

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Dancy notes that we could hedge our reasons with qualifiers attempting to guarantee that they will function in a particular way:

- ❖ e.g. that an act has the feature **'is kind'** is always *some* reason to perform it – unless the person is presuming on one's kindness, or one has made a promise to refrain from being excessively kind, or the person is a psychopath whom kindness will inflame to do bad things...*(etc etc etc)*

However, **“what the generalist reached, in defending her supposed reason by complication, is...not itself a reason at all, but only a guarantee (when finally complete) that there is a reason somewhere within it....And why should we suppose that...it is only a reason when present in a larger state within which it is guaranteed to serve as such?”** (Dancy, 2009)

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- To be **sensitive to the specificities** of situations requiring moral decision-making is itself an (irreducible) virtue.
- Too general an ethical theory can actually make you **worse morally**:
 - “generalism seems to validate certain patterns of argument that particularists would think of as invalid. For instance, a generalist might think ‘Feature F made a difference in that case; so it must make the same sort of difference here too’.” (Dancy, 2009)
- E.g. **“it obeys the law”** is prima facie reason to approve of an action in Germany in 1929, therefore it is in Germany in 1944.

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“Particularis[ts]...recommend keeping one’s eyes firmly fixed on the case before one, rather than trying to squeeze an answer to one problem out of the answer to another. This does not show that there is nothing to be learnt from other cases...

One can perfectly well say ‘this feature mattered there, and so it might well matter here – I had better have a look and see whether it does or not.’ What one cannot and should not do is to say ‘it mattered there and so it *must* matter here.’ So particularists allow a relevance to moral experience; they are not reduced to just gazing vacantly at the case before them and coming up with an answer that somehow seems appropriate”

(Dancy, 2009)

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- There is a recent (>1980s) move to derive analogous insights for epistemology as virtue ethics did for ethics.
- This makes sense insofar as:
 - ❖ evaluating inquiry is a **normative** endeavour
 - ❖ **'good' inquiry** may be seen as a special case of **'good' action**.
- The result has arguably been a rare **genuine theoretical unification** in philosophy, leading a raft of insights/new approaches to be thrown up wholesale in epistemology.

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- Just as we saw with virtue ethics, virtue epistemology introduces greater *holism* and *contextualism* by:
 - i. Shifting focus of epistemology from evaluating *beliefs* (considered in some abstract sense) to evaluating *whole persons* (“knowers, or would-be knowers, come to bear as much of the onus of credibility as “the known” has standardly borne” – Code, 1987) (C.f. *wisdom* – a concept arguably neglected by mainstream epistemology)
 - ii. Broadening exclusive focus on *thin epistemic concepts* (known/not known, warranted/not warranted), to consider *thick epistemic concepts* (observant, open-minded, thorough...)

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- Part of this broadening is to call into question **the very role of epistemology** as explicating the nature of *knowledge* (including answering sceptical challenges)
- Too often, virtue ethicists claim, this exclusive focus leads epistemologists to view their ultimate aim as developing a kind of *belief validation calculus*:

“Even those who question the value of the concept of **moral obligation** will recognize that we can acquire obligations in special cases: by...signing contracts for example. Their objection is to the applicability of obligation to cases which lack special legal or institutional backing. We might also make sense of a **specialized use of the word ‘knows’** to identify sources of reliable testimony, or of speaking of justification in special cases...It does not follow from this that interesting concepts of knowledge and justification apply more generally...” (Hookway, 2003)

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- What other role might epistemology have?
- **One suggestion:** imparting **useable insights regarding how to regulate inquiry:**

“The notions of a ‘well-conducted inquiry’ or of a ‘well-managed system of opinions’ emerge as important foci for what seems to be a form of epistemic evaluation. And...states such as virtues may well have an important role in the evaluations we make use of when ordering inquiries and managing our beliefs.” (Hookway, 2003)

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- It was suggested: to be **sensitive to the specificities** of situations requiring moral decision-making is itself **an (irreducible) moral virtue**.
- Too general an ethical theory can actually make you **worse morally**:
- Now analogously, we might claim: to be **sensitive to the specificities** of situations requiring a decision about what to believe is itself **an (irreducible) epistemic virtue**.
- Too general an epistemological theory can actually make you **more confused**.

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- Hookway is a nice example of a philosopher whose work bridges both.
- His definition of pragmatism: focus not on *states (e.g. belief)* but *activities (e.g. inquiry)*
- This is not to view pragmatism as a form of anti-realism: 'anything goes'.
- Rather, it is a faith in *the capacity of experimentation to deliver stable answers to all of our meaningful questions.*
- This is arguably the most complete form of realism.

This experimental attitude is encapsulated in....

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“Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.” (Charles Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.2).

Or in other words....

If you want to understand something,
think of specific examples.

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- We often advertise undergraduate epistemology courses to students promising to address such questions as:
 - ❖ What is reality?
 - ❖ When and how can we say that we have knowledge of reality?
 - ❖ Is knowledge, or what is real, relative to a cultural perspective?
- Many students enrol with enthusiasm to explore these questions.
- The life-stage of a typical undergraduate is often very stressful and confusing, e.g. decisions about lifelong career path, first engagement with adult relationships...
- In the face of this, many students think surely a greater understanding of what is and is not *known*, and what is and is not *real* would help.

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- However what do these students commonly encounter?
- An introduction to epistemology *via* a question of *global skepticism*, which, it is claimed, derives from *Descartes*, “the father of modern philosophy”.
- If global skepticism could be put in the form of a question, it would arguably be something like:
 - **GS1: Is the entire world real or is the entire world not real?**
OR:
 - **GS2: Do we know what we think we know or do we know nothing at all?**
- At this point, key textbooks either emphasize the questions and their overwhelming difficulty...

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"The skeptical conclusion is that knowledge is impossible. No one *does* know, because no one *can* know." **Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* , p. 1**

"Philosophical skepticism[\'s] essential element is a general view about human knowledge...the philosophical sceptic holds, or at least finds irrefutable, the view that knowledge is *impossible*." **Williams, "Skepticism", *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* , p. 35**

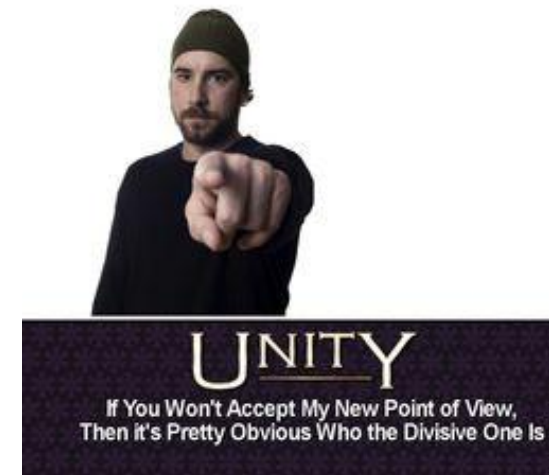
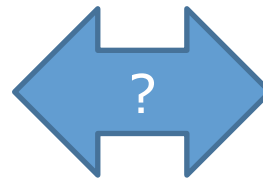
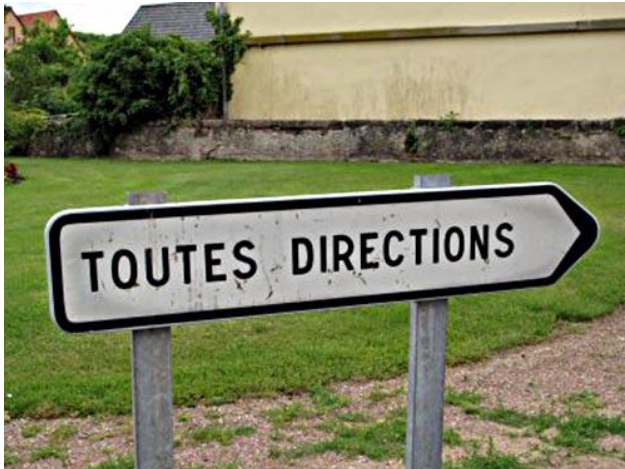
"General epistemology will be concerned with questions, such as...\'Are there general reasons to think knowledge of any kind is unobtainable?'" **Cooper, *Epistemology: The Classic Readings* (Blackwell, 1999), p. 2**

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- ...or the textbooks begin offering the philosophical writer's own answers to the problem.
- At the very introductory point these students are at, this might be argued to replace the teaching of **global skepticism** with a teaching of **global dogmatism**



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"As I look at the green field before me, I might believe not only that there is a green field there but also that I see one. And I do see one. I visually perceive it...Both beliefs, the belief that there is a green field there, and the self-referential belief that *I* see one, are grounded, causally, justificationaly, and epistemically, in my visual experience. They are produced by that experience, justified by it, and constitute knowledge in virtue of it." *Audi, Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge, p, 14*

"Descartes...had the courage and audacity to challenge the validity of all his beliefs, including his belief in God. Ironically, in pursuing the farthest reaches of what can be doubted, Descartes found the basis of knowledge itself." *Alcoff (ed), Epistemology: The Big Questions, p. 3*

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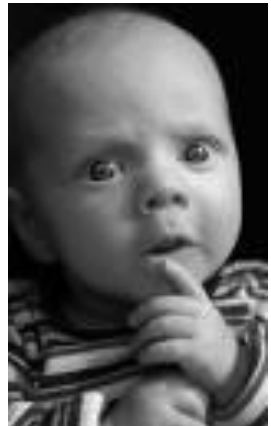
- If we return to the pragmatic maxim, what conceivable practical difference does it make in the life of a typical undergraduate if the answers to:
 - ❖ **GS1: Is the entire world real or is the entire world not real?**
 - ❖ **GS2: Do we know what we think we know or do we know nothing at all?**are **yes** or **no**?
- For instance: ***If the entire world is not real, how might this affect my choice of career?***

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- One could argue at length about whether any two issues are really unconnected if one only does enough philosophy, and about the desirability of pursuing 'Topics of Vital Importance' as opposed to general questions considered for their own sake.
- However the bottom line is that in my own teaching I have observed students can't see connections between **GS1** and **GS2** and their own experience, even if they try quite hard.



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- The worst consequence, in my opinion, is that as the best students usually desire to follow and please the teacher, when presented with this material they learn to *feign interest in questions for which they cannot see any specific applications.*
- This impacts profoundly on their epistemological development.



A word on “Experimental Philosophy”

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Experiment on yourself!

So tantalising to the pragmatist philosopher and yet, insofar as it focusses on collecting 'folk' 'intuitions' about professional debates translated into ordinary language, as yet so limited...

'Reality' Experiment

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Virtue Epistemology's challenge to Mainstream
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Reality' Experiment
Question-time in Reverse
Genuine Question-time

STAGE 1 (groups of 3): General Definition

“X is real if and only if...”



Pooling your philosophical expertise, and years of experience, write the **best general definition** you as a group can muster

- If you have a principled objection to the proffered definitional format (e.g. you feel it demands necessary and sufficient conditions, to which you have ideological objections) please craft *whichever form of definition you do favour*
- If you have a principled objection to developing philosophical definitions, please *do whatever you think is most appropriate to clarify* this most widely used philosophical term

'Reality' Experiment

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STAGE 2 (groups of 3): Specific Cases



Examine the specific cases. About each case, decide:

- i. Is it a) real, b) not real, c) 'it depends' (in which case say what 'it' depends on)?
- ii. Does your previous definition of reality give the same answer for this case as you just did?

Question-time in Reverse

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STAGE 3 (whole group): Reflection

When you brought the specific cases to your
general definition – did you notice
anything?



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Thank you for coming