HUM123 – Lecture 21: Epistemology, Reason, Revelation, and Metaphysics

What is Philosophy?

Philosophy fundamentally revolves around three central questions: *What's what? What's good?* and *What do we know or what's true?* These questions correspond to the major branches of philosophy: metaphysics (reality and existence), ethics (morality and value), and epistemology (knowledge and truth). These core inquiries guide philosophical investigation into the world, human behavior, and understanding.

Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge)

Epistemology, as a philosophical branch, deals specifically with knowledge, its nature, origin, and limits. It asks how we come to know anything, what counts as true knowledge, and how knowledge differs from mere belief or opinion. As the theory of knowledge, epistemology provides the foundation for assessing what we claim to know.

Questions in Epistemology

Key epistemological questions include: What is the nature of knowledge? What are its sources and what are the limits of what we can know? What distinguishes knowledge from belief or opinion? How do we define truth, and how is it different from falsity? Is it possible to truly know anything at all? These questions challenge our assumptions about certainty and understanding.

Theories of Truth

Theories of truth aim to explain what makes statements true or false. Different philosophical traditions offer varying theories, such as the correspondence theory (truth as agreement with reality), coherence theory (truth as consistency with a system), and pragmatic theory (truth as what works). These theories influence how we assess claims and beliefs.

Definition of Epistemology

The term 'epistemology' is derived from the Greek *episteme* (knowledge) and *logia* (study or science). Hence, epistemology is the scientific study of knowledge and justified belief. It investigates how knowledge is acquired, validated, and related to truth and belief. It also deals with skepticism and the transmission of knowledge across different disciplines and cultures.

What Kind of Things We Know

Knowledge encompasses various domains, including people, places, and languages. Understanding how we know something involves considering the method, time, and context in which knowledge is acquired. The core difference between belief and knowledge is truth. Beliefs can be true or false, while knowledge requires that the belief be both true and justified.

Epistemological Understanding

Epistemological structures include several components: knowledge includes *what*, *that*, *where*, and *when* something is known. Truth is made of belief, rationality, and trust. Thinking relies on perception and evidence, while certainty requires reliability and justification. A full epistemological understanding integrates these elements into a coherent view of knowledge.

Socrates on Knowledge

Socrates held that doubt is the beginning of truth. He considered himself not a teacher but a midwife who helps others bring ideas to birth. Socrates pioneered the dialectical method, a dialogical technique where conflicting viewpoints are explored to reveal contradictions and move closer to truth.

Socrates - The Dialectical Method

The dialectical method, from the Greek *dialektos* (conversation), involves structured dialogue between people with different views. Each participant presents their interpretation of a word, idea, or topic, defending it with logical reasoning. The goal is to arrive at a shared understanding or definition, illuminating truth through collective inquiry.

Policy Making Through Socrates' Dialectic Method

Socratic dialectic can be applied to policymaking by encouraging open-ended discussion among diverse stakeholders. This method ensures that multiple perspectives are considered, helping develop policies grounded in reason, logic, and shared values rather than ideology alone.

Research Hypothesis Based on Socratic Dialectic Method

The dialectic method also influences research development. By posing questions and exploring opposing viewpoints, researchers can formulate hypotheses that are well-rounded and deeply considered. This reflective process enhances critical thinking and analytical depth.

Plato – Allegory of the Cave Idea to Explain Epistemology

Plato's allegory of the cave illustrates how people often mistake sensory experiences for reality. Like prisoners in a cave seeing shadows, most rely on perception instead of reason. Plato argued that true knowledge must be logical and reasoned, and truth should be as certain as mathematical axioms. He defined knowledge as justified true belief.

Semantic Culture (5000 Years Ago in Arabian Peninsula)

The cultures of early monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—were shaped by belief in the divine word. Jews rely on the Torah and Hebrew Bible; Christians, particularly Byzantine Christians, often rejected visual imagery; and Islam centers on the Quran, revealed through oral recitation. These traditions emphasize listening and recitation as the path to divine knowledge.

Three Principles of Medieval Philosophy

Medieval philosophy rested on three pillars: Ratio, the use of logic and dialectics as developed by Plato and Aristotle; Auctorias, a deference to religious authority and the teachings of saints; and Concordia, the attempt to reconcile reason with revelation. This framework aimed to synthesize faith and logic into a unified worldview.

Reason and Faith Debate

In philosophical debates, it was argued that results should follow from premises, not the reverse. Christian thinkers tried to harmonize Biblical teachings with philosophical logic, proposing that Plato's ideas—such as the soul—were compatible with divine teachings. Philosophy was seen by some as a divine gift, with figures like Saint Augustine and Saint Aquinas promoting this integration.

Reason and Revelation Conflict

Cultural and linguistic differences shaped understandings of knowledge. Indo-European traditions valued visual insight (to see), while Semitic traditions emphasized listening (to hear the word of God). Greek Orthodoxy prohibited imagery of Christ, and Christian theologians viewed Greco-Roman philosophy with suspicion, sometimes labeling it as pagan.

Islamic Epistemology

Islamic thought, rooted in the Semitic tradition, emphasizes the importance of reading and listening. The Quran begins with the command "Read in the name of your Lord." Seeking knowledge is considered a path to paradise. Islamic civilization contributed significantly to global knowledge by inventing paper, translating classical works, and pioneering mathematics—especially through the concept of zero.

Muslim Philosophers on Reason and Revelation

Muslim philosophical schools differed in their views. The Mutazilites supported the use of reason in understanding faith, while the Asharites, particularly Al-Ghazali, emphasized that revelation must override reason. According to Asharites, humans perform actions, but God creates them—humans merely acquire these actions and are responsible for them.

Al-Kindi, Al-Razi, Al-Farabi

These thinkers played foundational roles in Islamic philosophy. Al-Kindi translated Greek texts and advocated for harmony between reason and revelation. Al-Razi criticized reliance on imitation (taqlid) and championed rational thought (aql). Al-Farabi outlined four faculties of the soul: appetitive (desires), sensitive (perception), imaginative (memory), and rational (reason), the last of which he viewed as divine and immortal.

Ibn-Sina, Al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd

Ibn Sina (Avicenna) argued that sensation prepares the soul for rational understanding. Al-Ghazali criticized overreliance on philosophy in *The Incoherence of Philosophy*, arguing that moral truth comes from Quran and Hadith. Ibn Rushd (Averroes) responded with *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, defending the compatibility of Islam and philosophy and affirming that truth cannot contradict truth.

Abrahamic Theology vs Philosophy

Philosophical and theological perspectives diverge on core metaphysical questions. Greek philosophers like Aristotle believed matter was eternal and that the soul died with the body. In contrast, Abrahamic theology asserts that God created time, space, and matter, and that the soul survives and is resurrected.

Modern Philosophy on Reason and Revelation

In modern philosophy, both reason and faith have been treated as sources of belief. Kierkegaard emphasized faith, even irrationally. Locke, by contrast, argued that faith must be reasonable—if a religious belief contradicts logic or known facts, it must be considered flawed. This debate continues to shape theological and philosophical thought.

Metaphysics

Metaphysics is the philosophical study of reality, existence, and being. It asks foundational questions about the universe, God, the soul, and free will. It seeks to understand the principles behind all things, including the mind-body relationship and the nature of existence itself.

Metaphysical Questions

Some core metaphysical inquiries include: What is reality? How did the world originate? Is there a world outside the mind? How do non-physical thoughts affect physical bodies? What is nature of being? Does God exist, and if so, what is His nature?

Branches of Metaphysical Philosophy

Metaphysics includes several branches: Ontology (study of being), Teleology (study of purpose), Philosophical Theology (study of God and religion), and Cosmology (study of the universe's origin and structure). Aristotle described metaphysics as "first philosophy," concerned with first causes and principles of reality.

Fatalism Versus Naturalism

Pre-Socratic philosophers began rejecting fatalistic, mythological explanations in favor of naturalistic reasoning. Naturalism proposed that events like earthquakes were caused by natural

laws, not divine wrath. Thinkers like Hippocrates attributed illness to physical imbalance, not supernatural forces, and advocated for moderation and health.

Classical Philosophers on Naturalism and Materialism

Plato promoted dualism and ideal forms. Aristotle offered the theory of causes and an unmoved mover. He identified sub-lunar and supra-lunar substances and introduced the idea of teleology, explaining phenomena through their purpose rather than their cause.

Muslim Philosophy – Naturalism and Materialism

Muslim thinkers debated the eternity of the universe and the nature of the soul. Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina agreed with Aristotle that the universe is eternal and argued for continuous motion and unchanging divine will. Ibn Sina distinguished between essence (*mahiyya*) and existence (*wujūd*) and defined metaphysics as the study of "being as being."

Metaphysics in Modern Philosophy

Modern thinkers redefined metaphysical concepts. Parmenides said, "Being is not-being is not." Anselm proposed that real existence is greater than mental existence. Descartes saw existence as perfection. Kant considered being a logical category, Hegel called it abstract, and Russell claimed universals subsist but do not exist.