Welcome back. We are starting a new topic today, a new part of the course. This part of the course we will address the subject of knowledge and specifically what in philosophy is called the theory of knowledge, the technical word for which is epistemology, episteme being the Greek word for knowledge and ology being the study of. It is an ancient subject, goes all the way back to the beginnings of philosophy to ancient Greece. It really consists of — in order to sort of communicate what the subject is about, it’s probably easiest to talk about a few distinctive questions that arise within the context of epistemology rather than try and give some sort of abstract definition to cover all the cases. Epistemology is a broad subject that has a lot of different sub areas in it. In this course we’re going to look at three of those subject areas so I’m gonna talk today a little bit about each. Next time we’ll dive into the first of the authors that we’ll be reading, which will be John Locke, excerpts from the essay concerning human understanding.

The three questions — the three epistemological questions that we’re going to address in this course are as follows. The first question is simply what is knowledge? What do we mean when we say someone knows something? The second question is how is knowledge acquired? How do we come to know things? And the third is what sort of certainty attaches to the things that we know? In other words, how certain can we be about the things that we purport to know? A sub-question of this sub-question is how do we overcome the kinds of doubts that can arise when we reflect on, for example, the unreliability of our senses, the unreliability of our reasoning capacities? A) how unreliable are these? B) If they are somewhat unreliable, what does that say about the status of the things that we know by way of these faculties? And so these are questions that all fall within the umbrella of epistemology or the theory of knowledge, all three of which we will talk about in this course.

And so what I want to do now is I want to go through each of these questions and
give a little preliminary blurb on each one, just to sort of get you into the mindset of what we’re gonna be talking about before we plunge right into specific authors and texts.

So the first question that I asked was what is knowledge? What does knowledge consist of? What do we mean when we say someone knows P, or I know P, where P is any proposition? And there is, of course, a traditional view, a longstanding view. I would say it is still the predominant view but there have been some quite serious questions raised about this view. And as I will do in all the parts of this course, not only will I present sort of the mainline traditional view on these subjects but I will give you at least some indication of what some of the criticisms have been of the subject — of the traditional view in question.

Philosophy being so much concerned with argumentation and with kind of a point/counterpoint approach to questions, philosophy is not a series of doctrines or a series of dogmas. And so I think it’s always very important to understand that on any of the positions where we study traditional or mainline views that there are significant counter-traditions or dissenting traditions as well, and it’s important that you know what these are — at least what some of these are — and acquire some of the habits of criticism.

So the traditional view on the question what is knowledge, what does it mean to say I know P where P is any proposition, the traditional view is that knowledge is a kind of belief or a variety of belief. That the things we know are a subset of the larger set of things that we believe. Knowledge on this view is a kind of a belief plus. To know P is to believe P plus some other things. And what the other things are has been the subject of much philosophical discussion over the course of the millennia.

One qualifying condition is — one of the pluses has always been truth — that is, a truth condition. In short, if you know P, the traditional view goes, you believe P at least and P is true. The idea here — and this really stems from our sort of common
intuitions and our ordinary ways of speaking — the intuition here is that there’s something awfully odd about saying that I know something that’s false. There’s no trouble in saying I believe something that’s false.

If I told you that there was a person I knew who believed that the moon was made of green cheese, this would not be a weird thing to say in any sort of linguistic sense of weirdness. In other words, you might think such a person weird. You might think it weird that a person in today’s day and age, with all that we know about the moon, given that people have been to the moon and that we know that the moon is made of rock, you might think such a person odd who believed that the moon was made of green cheese but you wouldn’t think that there’s anything odd about ascribing a belief to a person that’s false. In other words, you might be surprised that they have a false belief, but you wouldn’t find anything sort of linguistically odd about saying that someone believes something that’s false.

On the other hand, to say that someone knows something false seems at odds with ordinary usage. You wouldn’t say of someone that they knew that the moon was made of green cheese because, of course, it isn’t. In other words, the proposition that the moon is made of green cheese is false. And so you couldn’t say that someone knew something that was false. You would say they believed something that was false. And so the idea is, well, one of the things that distinguishes that subset of belief that we refer to as our knowledge — one of the things that distinguishes that subgroup of beliefs is that they’re true. I do think that this is in keeping with ordinary usage. We don’t think that it’s a correct way of using the word to know. We don’t think it’s correct to use the word know with respect to things that are false.

This does, however, raise some interesting questions as to whether one can ever know that one knows. Because, of course, whether a belief is true or false is something that we can think. In other words, I might have very good reason for
thinking that — you know, I currently believe that the moon is made out of rock and I
think that I know this. I think that this has been confirmed by all the evidence that one
could possibly marshal. We’ve had people to the moon. We’ve looked at the moon
through telescopes. We’ve done analyses of the rocks that people have brought back
from the moon. So I would describe my belief that the moon is made of rock — I would
describe it as an instance of something that I know. But, of course, all we need to do is
simply reflect on the history of science and we quickly see that things that people once
thought they knew, for which there was an awful lot of good evidence, have since turned
out to be false. I guess I could imagine, you know, scenarios, some of which might be
sort of strange but certainly possibly, in which it turned out the moon wasn’t made out of
rock after all.

And so the question is we might agree that, as sort of a linguistic matter, we don’t
apply the word **knowledge** other than to things that we think are true. But, of course,
whether or not something is true is itself a question that can never be conclusively
answered. It’s always possible in the future that a proposition that we think is true
might turn up to be false. And so while we might want to say that knowledge is belief
plus truth, knowledge is true belief, the question is how we ever know whether we know
something is a difficult one.

And I would think that in those cases where we once thought we knew something
which later turned out to be false, we would describe such a circumstance as one in
which we never knew it to begin with; rather, we thought we knew it but it subsequently
turned out that we only believed it. And this is not something that we’re going to solve.
It’s not even a question -- whether we know that we can know is not even a question
that we’ll address in this course. I just wanted you to understand that while the truth
condition is generally uncontroversial — that is, there are very few people who say that
you can know something that’s false — the truth condition does raise all sorts of
interesting and somewhat difficult questions itself for which there has been no shortage of answers, many of which are in conflict with each other. The question of whether we ever can know that we know is one for which there has not been a widely accepted answer but rather many different conflicting answers.

So we might say that what it is to know $P$ is to believe $P$ and for $P$ to be true. That is that knowledge is true belief. And there are some who think this. It is believed that this was essentially Plato’s view. But there’ve been a number of reasons for thinking that a truth condition by itself is not sufficient for someone to know something. The main reason for doubting this is that one can stumble on the truth by accident. In other words, one might believe something for no good reason at all. So suppose that you read in the newspaper in your horoscope that — imagine a young man is reading the horoscopes in the paper and he reads that his girlfriend will break up with him in the next few weeks. And so suppose that he now, because he’s a superstitious kind of guy, suppose that he believes that his girlfriend is gonna break up with him in a few weeks. And then indeed suppose that in a few weeks his girlfriend does indeed break up with him. Would we describe this as a situation in which the young man knew that his girlfriend was going to break up with him?

Inasmuch as he believed it and it turned out to be true, if knowledge is simply true belief, then we would have to say that he knew that his girlfriend was gonna break up with him. But I would at least suggest that this runs contrary to our use of the word **to know**. The word **to know** — let me put it this way. That knowledge is not merely a semantic relation. That is, knowledge does not simply describe the relationship between a belief and a state of affairs in the world or a fact. That knowledge also is a kind of honorific. That is, when we say that someone knows something, we’re not only saying something about the relation between a proposition and the world, but we’re saying something about the person. That the person had made a certain
accomplishment. And this honorific sense of knowing and this idea that there’s something counterintuitive about knowing something by accident has caused many — I would say most philosophers to add to the truth condition a justification condition.

So when one knows P, not only does one believe P, not only is P true, but one also is justified in believing P. And by justification, what we mean is a good reason for believing something. Now, of course, that immediately begs the question, “Well, what constitutes a good reason?” Generally speaking, when people talk about justifications as good reasons, they mean that a justification is a good reason for believing something where by good reason we mean the kind of reason that is likely to produce a true belief.

So let’s go back to our guy/girlfriend/horoscope example and I’m now gonna give two scenarios. The first scenario is the one I described. A guy reads the horoscope and the horoscope tells him that his girlfriend is gonna break up with him in the next few weeks, and he believes it and then it turns out to be true. Now, imagine the second scenario. The guy also believes that his girlfriend is gonna break up with him but not because he read it in the horoscope. Instead, imagine that the guy overhears his girlfriend having a conversation with her best friend. So you can imagine that he’s sitting in a coffeehouse and that his girlfriend also happens to be in the coffeehouse. She’s sitting with her friend and she does not know that the boyfriend is there. She’s just talking with the girlfriend about what’s going on and she’s speaking in a loud enough voice that the boyfriend can hear. He overhears her tell her girlfriend, “I’m going to break up with him next week.” And again in that scenario, suppose indeed that a week later she breaks up with him.

Now, in the first example, the argument would be that the guy doesn’t know that the girlfriend is gonna break up with him. Even though he believes it and even though the belief turned out to be true, he wasn’t justified in believing it. His reason for believing it was not a good reason. It was not the kind of reason that commonly
produces true beliefs. And, of course, a horoscope is not a good reason for believing anything, given that the principle upon which horoscopes are based the idea that somehow the alignments of planets or stars has an effect on you on your day-to-day life is bogus.

I hope I don’t need to convince you of that. Horoscopes may be fun and everything, but clearly they’re not a truth reliable method of coming to know things about the world. One of the reasons for thinking that is that we’ve been given no reason to think that they are. There’s no reason to think that distant planets and stars have any effect on your life whatsoever. And, of course, there’s the further inconvenient fact that given that most of these stars are at a great distance from us, we are actually seeing them as they were tens, hundreds of thousands of years ago. The stars may have long gone super nova so the stars that are allegedly affecting your life may have been extinct for thousands of years and you’re seeing them as they were in the past.

So the idea is that, look. The first guy may have a true belief, but he doesn’t know P because he’s not justified in believing. He doesn’t have a good reason for believing it. He just kind of stumbled on the truth. The second guy, however, I would argue does have a good reason for believing it. Typically, we take empirical evidence — that is, sensory data, data that arises from observation. We generally take such evidence as constituting truth for reliable reasons. Certainly eye-witness reports are a primary form of evidence in the courts and, of course, all of scientific knowledge is based upon empirically gathered evidence, evidence gathered by way of the senses. And so the idea would be that the second guy indeed does know that his girlfriend is going to break up with him because not only does he have a belief that’s true, but he believes it for the right reason. He acquired the belief in the right way.

Now, this view that knowledge is true justified belief — that what it means to say that S knows P where S is someone and P is a proposition — to what it means to say
that S knows P is that S believes P, S is justified in believing P, and P is true. This theory has been known as in the literature the tripartite theory of knowledge for the simple reason that it is the theory of knowledge that has three parts. I would say that it was the dominant view until the late 1960s when a number of serious questions were raised about it.

Indeed, there were questions raised about it even earlier, specifically by Gilbert Ryle who we've already met in this course. Gilbert Ryle questioned the very basic — the first assumption that knowledge is actually a subset of belief. Ryle questioned whether in fact when we say that S knows P, what we mean is to describe a state of mind of S. In other words, Ryle, in keeping with his ordinary language roots, wants to examine very carefully the different ways that we use the expression, so-and-so knows something. And Ryle concludes that it is not at all clear when we speak of someone knowing something that we are intending to ascribe a mental state to them in the way that we are — that we do when we say that someone believes something. So Ryle has questioned whether knowledge is even a subset of belief at all, let all of these sort of conditions that we're talking about. Ryle wonders whether knowledge is a species of belief of all, whether the ascriptions of knowledge are a very different kind of description of persons.

But the trouble that was raised for tripartite theory in the '60s was raised by the philosopher Edmund Gettier in a series of — a very short piece, actually, that he wrote which really consisted just of a series of examples which were designed as counter examples to the tripartite theory. I don't want to go into the examples in any detail. Suffice it to say that what the examples show — the examples at least cast doubt on whether the three conditions are enough. The typical response to the Gettier examples has been to add conditions, right? To add to truth, justification and belief further conditions that will sort of lock down the definition of knowledge.
The second question that I mention and that we’re gonna talk about is how is knowledge acquired? And here there are many, many positions. But historically, there have been roughly two camps. And I say roughly because philosophy textbooks and sort of standard history is often over-simplify this and imply as if there have been these sort of rival schools of thought which have persisted over time. I think that this overstates the orderliness of philosophical history.

But indeed there have been — one can identify two orientations that have sort of constantly butted heads in the debate about the acquisition of knowledge. I’m gonna describe these orientations and give them their traditional names. The first orientation is called empiricism. People who have this orientation are called empiracists. The basic idea of empiricism is that all knowledge begins with sensory experience, that the mind is in a sense a blank slate, a Tabula Rasa as they say in Latin, and that everything that gets imprinted on that blank slate has to come into the mind by way of the senses from the outside world. In other words, the mind is this kind of blank sheet of paper upon which the world writes its information through the sense organs. A classic — probably the most well-known empiricist is John Locke and we will be reading some of the things he has to say about knowledge as experience and read some of his arguments on behalf of the view that knowledge always begins with experience.

The second group — the second orientation is called rationalism and its proponents are called rationalists. The rationalist doesn't deny necessarily that knowledge comes from experience but the rationalist denies the exclusivity that’s tied to the empiricist thesis. What the rationalist denies is that all knowledge comes from experience. Rationalists tend to generally believe that some knowledge at least has sources other than experience. Rationalists break down into a number of camps or, even to put it more precisely, because that also, I think, is an over-simplification, there are different forms of this view, some of which are held by the same people. In other
words, one philosopher may hold multiple forms of this view. He may be a rationalist in several different senses.

Just to give two broad versions of this thesis, one version of rationalism I’m going to call innatism and innatism is the view that some knowledge is inborn — that is, we are born knowing things. That is, the knowledge is innate. It’s in our minds when we’re born, when we come into the world. Probably the best example of innatist rationalism is the rationalism of the linguist, Noam Chomsky. You may know Chomsky from the world of radical politics. Chomsky is an outspoken radical, left-wing political theorist and social critic.

But actually his training is in linguistics. He is the most important linguist of the last century. One of the things that Chomsky did was demonstrate that there are aspects of language which are innate to human beings. The way he proved this — I’m not gonna go into the details — but what he basically did was he demonstrated that human language acquisition and certain aspects of human linguistic performance cannot be explained unless we presuppose some form of innate knowledge. Specifically, Chomsky thinks that we all are born with an innate syntax, what he calls a deep grammar. One of the ways he shows this is by showing that all natural languages — that is, all languages that are spoken — share a common deep structure, even while their surface structures, their surface grammars, are radically different. So one well-known recent example of innatist rationalism is Chomsky’s linguistic innatism. There are, of course, other forms of innatist rationalism but I won’t go into them here.

Another version of the rationalist orientation I will call a priorism. What this view basically says is that some knowledge is acquired via non-empirical methods. This view is not that we’re born knowing things. This is still a view about acquired knowledge but the view says that not all knowledge that’s acquired is acquired by way of the senses. Indeed, some knowledge is acquired by other means and typically the
means are some form of non-sensory intuition.

The most common example of knowledge that’s alleged to be a priori but not innate is mathematics, knowledge of mathematics. Mathematical knowledge is not acquired through the senses. It’s not acquired by observation. It’s acquired by deductive proof from first principles or axioms. And the question of how we know the axioms typically is answered by reference to some form of non-empirical intuition. Two examples of a priorist rationalism are the philosophies of Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant, and we will examine some of Descartes’ views on a priori knowledge in this course.

The third question that I asked was — had to do with certainty. What sort of certainty can we have about the things we know and how do we overcome doubts that arise because of the apparent unreliability of our senses and of our intellectual faculties, of our reasoning abilities. This question arises in response to a number of very powerful expressions of skepticism that stretch all the way back to antiquity. There was an ancient school of thought, a school of thought in ancient Athens, that were called the skeptics. They were called the skeptics. And in the Enlightenment there were several philosophers — Descartes most notably — who articulated skeptical doubts of a particularly powerful kind. Powerful because they sufficed to cast doubt on almost everything we believe.

The two general sources of skepticism of doubt are, first of all, the unreliability of our senses and reasoning abilities. It is obvious that our senses don’t always tell us the truth, don’t always represent the world in an accurate way, and, of course, our reasoning can misfire. How often have you done a math problem or some other sort of problem that involves deductive reasoning and flubbed it because you messed up the reasoning? You missed a step, you incorrectly performed a step. One source of skepticism has always been the fallability of our methods of knowledge acquisition.
Another form of skepticism a bit more exotic derives from a dreaming and deception hypothesis. So many philosophers have noticed that one can have dreaming experiences that are very similar to or even identical to waking experiences and have then posed the question, “Well, how does one know that one isn’t dreaming right now? How does one know that the knowledge that one thinks one has is not really the contents of a dream?” There was a particularly good recent film made based on this theme, an art house film called “Waking Life,” which I strongly recommend. It was actually recommended to me by one of my students in one of my introductory level courses. When we did this part of the course, he said, “Hey, you should see ‘Waking Life.’ It’s about that.” The story is essentially about the protagonist, someone who throughout the film is trying to figure out whether he’s sleeping or awake, whether he’s dreaming or whether he’s having real experiences. He goes from sort of one experience to another and talks to different people.

The other form of this — the other version of this form of skepticism has to do with speculations of deception. The example you’re probably most familiar with from recent popular culture, of course, is “The Matrix.” Given the capacity to simulate environments and to simulate and even to create thoughts in the minds of people. The question is, how do we know that we’re not currently in a simulation? How do you know that, for example — how do I know, for example, that I’m really standing at this podium as opposed to floating in a tank full of liquid in some machine somewhere, having this whole experience directly plugged into my mind? There are a lot of different versions of this form of doubt by deception. Descartes imagines an evil genius, someone a little bit like the devil who might be deceiving us. But the idea again is simply to cast doubt upon the things that we think that we currently know.

Typically, those who’ve been optimistic about saving the idea of knowledge in the fact of these sorts of skeptical arguments, typically the strategy has been to try to
identify some foundational beliefs by which we mean axiom like beliefs, beliefs that sort of require no proof, that are sort of self-evident or obviously true. People have tried to sort of identify a set of foundational beliefs or a set of special methods by which the reliability of our knowledge could be assured. So the idea is, well, if we have a certain set of axioms, beliefs that can’t be doubted, and we have a set of methods of knowledge acquisition that we know are reliable, maybe there are ways in a sense to rule out these skeptical possibilities. I will tell you that the general consensus in the literature is that these strategies have not succeeded. That there are some strategies that are certainly on the table, that are of interest, that seem promising, but there is yet to be wide-scale consensus that the skeptical challenges have been overcome.

Another group of people who’ve been sort of less optimistic about overcoming these skeptical doubts have instead drawn the conclusion that human knowledge is, by its own nature, very limited. That our capacity to know has limits. And these philosophers have gone — have tried to describe an outline precisely what those limits are. The two philosophers most identified with pushing this line of the limitations of knowledge and reason in light of skeptical challenges — the most famous is the philosopher David Hume whose views we will be examining in this course, and of course Immanuel Kant is also identified with marking out the limits of reason in his work.

So we are going to proceed in the next lectures, first talking about the question how is knowledge acquired and then with the question about what sort of certainty we can have, the question of skepticism certainty and limits. We will read John Locke, we will read Rene Descartes, we will read David Hume and others. So let me just leave you with some questions for next time.

The first question I want you to answer or to think about is what are some of Locke’s arguments against the idea — against the notion that some knowledge is innate? What is Locke’s main case against innatism? Secondly, see if you can
identify the basic stages by which and manner in which Locke thinks knowledge is acquired. See if you can lay out a very rough description of Locke’s account of knowledge acquisition.

So I will leave you for now and we will pick this up next time with the views of John Locke. Thank you very much.