UNIT 3:
Social Epistemology

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27/04/'09 - 11/05/'09 - 18/05/'09
COURSE: Epistemology (Instructor: Stephan Hartmann)

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- Session 10 (Apr. 27th): From Standard Analytical Epistemology to Social Epistemology.
- Session 11 (May 11th): Disagreement, Consensus and Judgment Aggregation.
- Session 12 (May 18th): Social Significance of Knowledge and Group Agency.

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- Relevant features of Standard Analytical Epistemology (SAE).
- Changes involved in switching from SAE to Social Epistemology (SE).
- Different conceptions of SE.

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- Why agreement and disagreement problems play a relevant role in SE.
- The role of “aggregation” and a survey into the “aggregation” literature.
- The downsides of aggregation: impossibility theorems.

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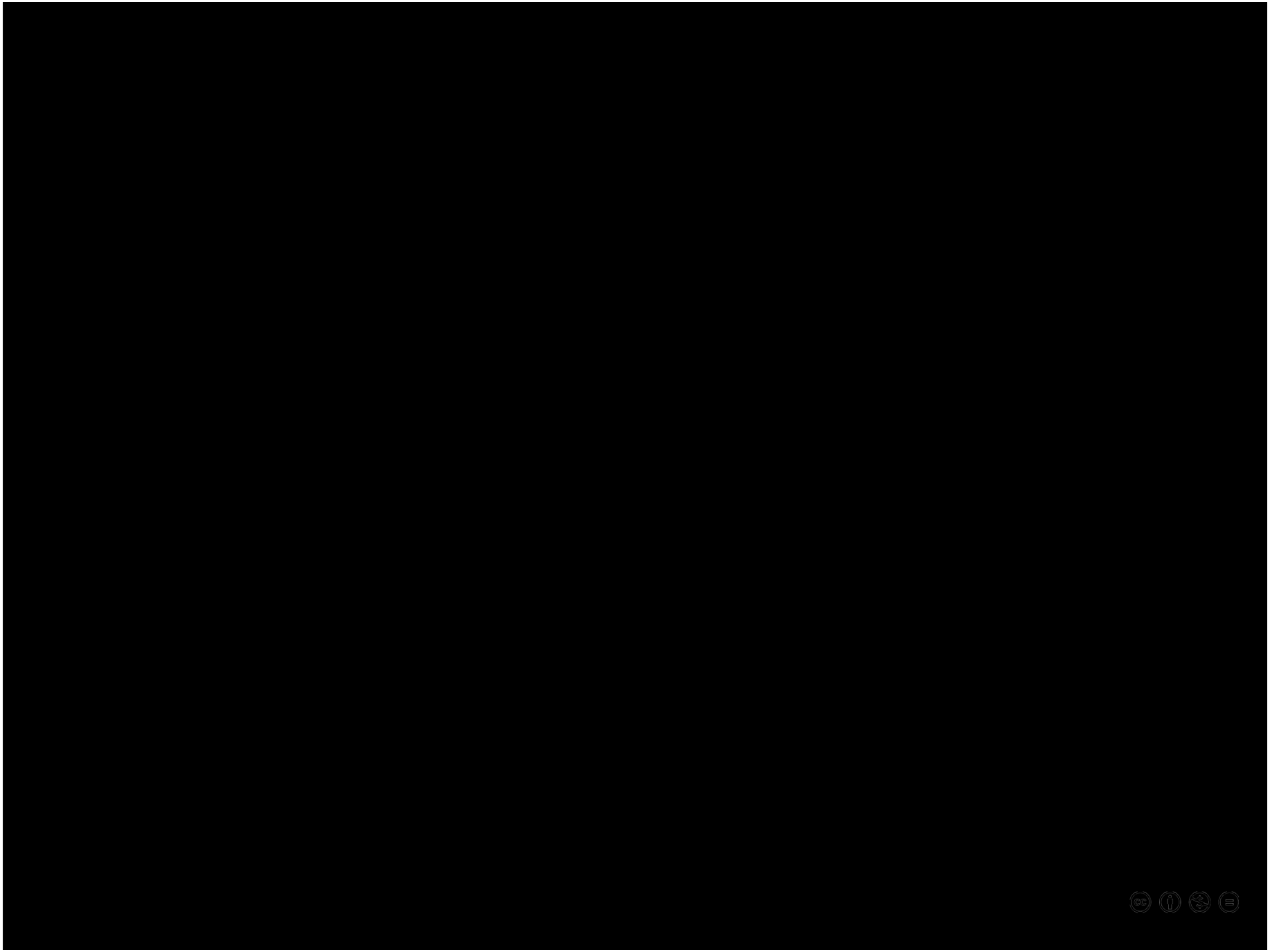
- The advantages of aggregation, group performance, democracies and deliberation.
- “Groups With Minds on Their Own” (P. Pettit) - Can groups be agents?
- A pragmatic view: SE and the society.
- Summary of the three lectures.



LECTURE 1

From Standard Analytical Epistemology to Social Epistemology.

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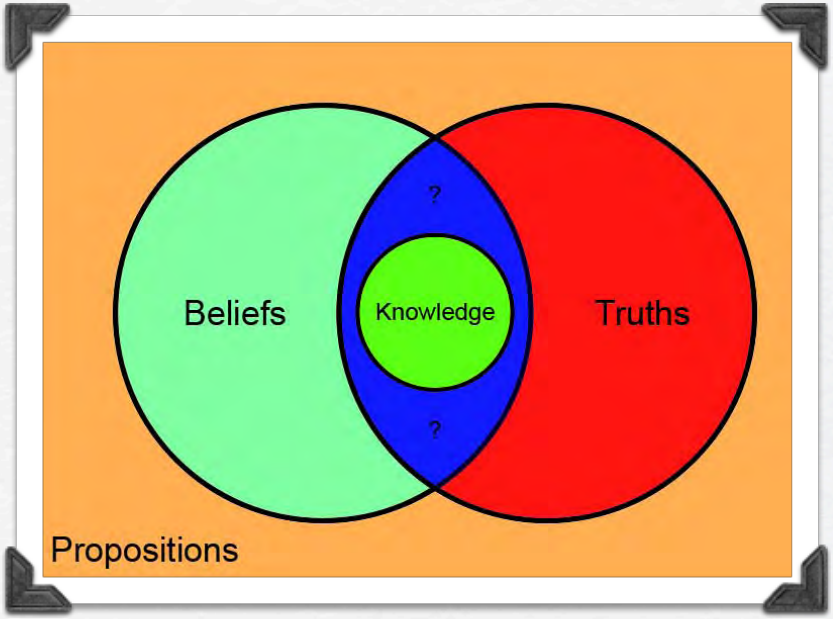
The JTB account of Knowledge

✓ Propositional Attitudes (e.g.: 'Believe that__' = *B*(P); 'Know that__' = *K*(P).)

✓ What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for proposition *P* to be regarded as a member of the class of "known propositions"?

✓ *P* is known *iff* '*P* is believed by person *A*' & '*P* is true' & '*A* is justified* in believing *P*'.



* What is justification? - Are there alternatives? (e.g. reliability, rationality, etc.)

‘*A* knows that__’:
What is the role of agents in Epistemology?

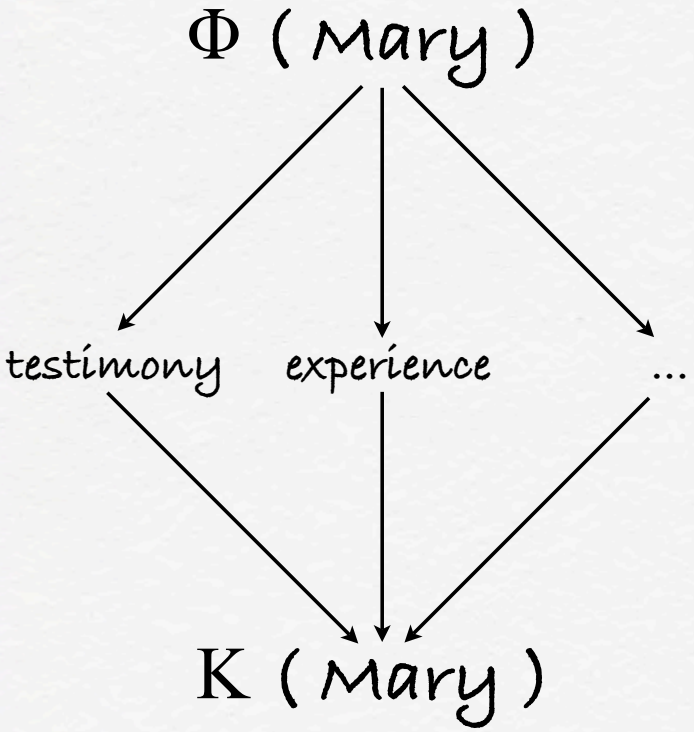
“Knowing that...” is:

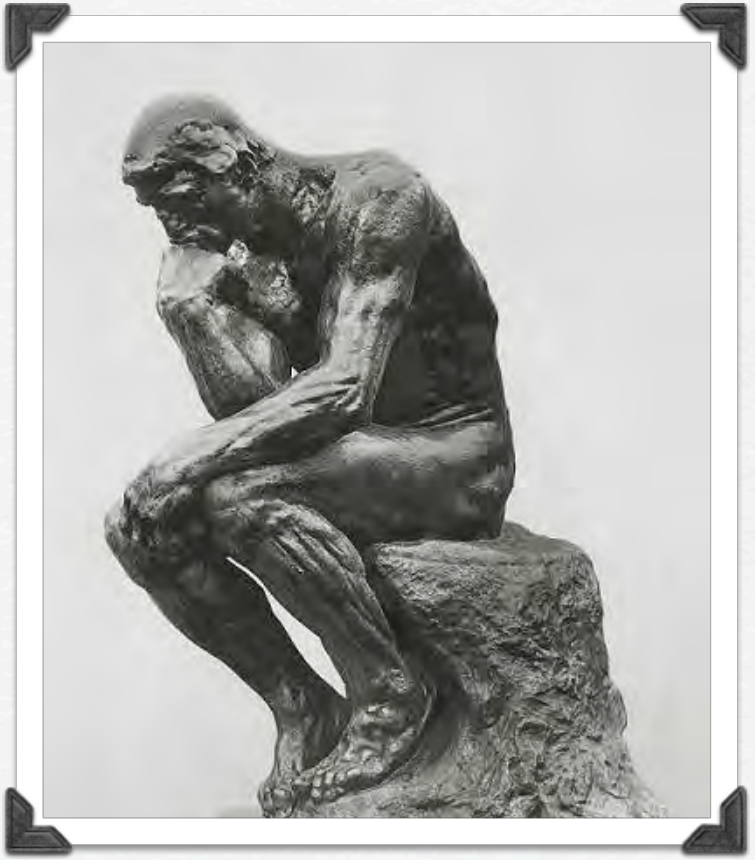
✓ A goal oriented activity: “Mary wants to know about ...”

✓ Means: testimony, experience, research, etc.

✓ Possession/Storage of Knowledge: “Mary knows that ...”

Who are the *agents* in the JBT account of knowledge?





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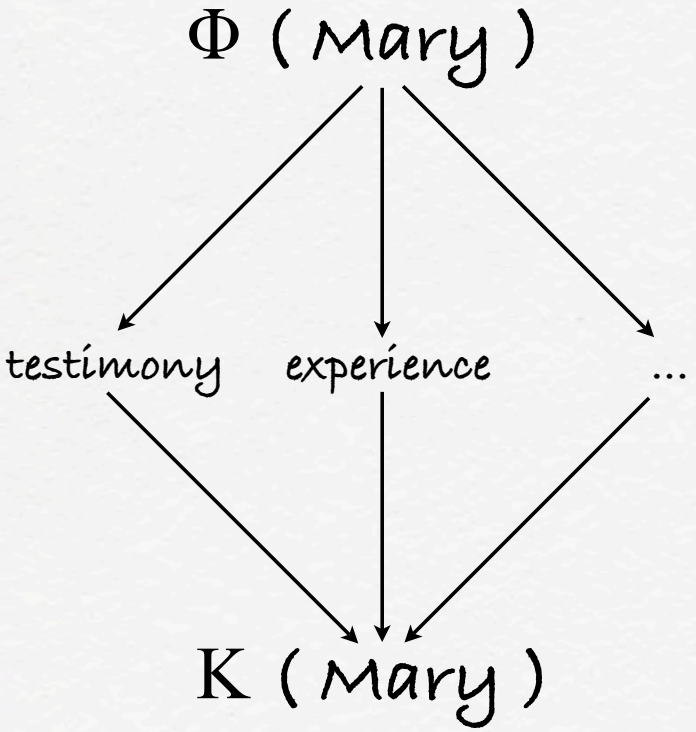

Intuition: there other types of agents, other than individuals, and there are other types of practices, other than individual ones.

Social Epistemology

- A goal oriented activity: “Mary wants to know about ...”.
- Means: testimony, experience, research, etc.
- Possession/Storage of Knowledge: “Mary knows that ...”.
- “The goal of the government is to protect the country’s borders”.
- “The MIT research team is developing...”
- “The scientific research community believes that the transplanted stem cells may be able to regenerate dead or dying human tissue, reversing the progress of disease” (NYT - Nov 1, 2000).
- *How can groups have goals? Intentions (normally) are thought of as something related to the mind. Groups don’t have minds.*
- *Is individual research or group-led research more reliable? (We want reliable knowledge).*
- *How can groups possess knowledge?*

'*P* is true/false':
How does the role of truth change in SE?

✓ Must a proposition be true in order to be known? (Alvin Goldman: veristic social epistemology).

✓ Are there alternative conceptions? (Consensus Consequentialism, Pragmatic/Utilitarian SE, Proceduralism.)

✓ In general, the foundationalist program (see Descartes) is usually set apart in favor of a less radical approaches: non-skeptical stance.

What is *veristic* SE?

✓ The focus of VSE (veristic social epistemology) is still, as in SAE, truth in a realistic perspective.

✓ The veristic approach is part of the consequentialist approach (*what is consequentialism?*), that is, epistemic practices are evaluated on the basis of the *consequences* they produce, in this case, the desideratum is *truth*.

✓ E.g. : We want to know whether it will rain tomorrow (April 27, 2009). We can:
- check the past record of rainy days in the past 50 years in the North Brabant area on April 27;
- consult a fortuneteller (seems silly? ask Richard Nixon!);
- ask your grandfather, who's got rheumatism, (seems silly? not so much.).
- watch the fauna around you (heavy animal response to climatic conditions).

✓ Upshot (and shortcoming for veristic epistemology): each method needs to be evaluated and evaluation is a complex matter, involving, unfortunately, interpretation of the results (see *Goldman*, *required reading*).

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF SE?

✓ Goldman (*required reading*) argues that alternative conceptions (all? *see reading material*) fail in some respect (pure consensualism) or need the concept of truth for their purposes.

✓ The veristic approach is part of the consequentialist approach (*what is consequentialism?*), that is, a knowledge-seeking practice is evaluated on the basis of its *performance*, a.k.a. *consequences*.

✓ All other epistemic practices mentioned in Goldman are consequentialist ones, exception made for *Proceduralism* (see *Goldman, required reading*).

✓ What is proceduralism? In general, under proceduralist standards an epistemic practice is not evaluated by its performance, rather in terms of its *intrinsic merits* (e.g.: Habermas' approach promotes *egalitarianism* and the Lehrer and Wagner approach promotes *rationality*.)

WHAT IS SOCIAL ABOUT SE?

✓ We have seen that at least in Goldman's account, most of the main tenets of Standard Analytical Epistemology are still in place.

✓ However, the focus has passed from considering an individual in its isolation, to considering groups that have collective goals, and that pursue collective epistemic practices: that is, they try to gain knowledge as groups.

✓ Questions that remain to be answered:

- How do we account for groups as knowing agents?
- Why should we think of groups as knowing agents?
- Are there any problems arising from aggregating individual attitudes (e.g. know-that, believe-that) into group attitudes?
- What are the advantages deriving from group-epistemic practices? In other words, why should we pursue knowledge in groups rather than individually? (nota bene: the answer may be trivial in a selected number of cases (e.g. lab research and time/effort constraints) but we will see that there are non trivial answers also in the other cases).

ASSIGNMENTS - I

(for A. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World*, Chapter 3: The Framework, pp. 69, 100)

- What examples of truth-seeking social practices are illustrated in Goldman's text?
- What are the alternatives to *Veristic Social Epistemology*? For each, what are their tenets?
- What is the goal of *Veristic Social Epistemology*?
- What are the shortcomings we are faced with, when adopting *Veristic Social Epistemolgy*?
- How does Goldman suggest to solve the *selection problem*?
- Goldman refers to two types of circularity. Explain what each type is, and if and why they constitute a problem for veristic epistemology.
- What is the difference between *fundamental veristic value* and *instrumental veristic value*?
- EXCERCISE: *see next page* ASSIGNMENTS II.
- The preceeding exercise applies Goldman's theory of Veristic Analysis to a single *credal agent*. However, Social Epistemology is about groups. How does his theory applies to a group of *credal agents*?

ASSIGNMENTS - II

(for A. Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World*, Chapter 3: The Framework, pp. 69, 100)

EXERCISE:

(this problems should be solved by considering Goldman's theory of Veristic Analysis as exposed in paragraph 3.4: pp. 87, 94, especially pp. 89-last paragraph, 90-bottom.)

PROBLEM: Consider the proposition *P*: "There is water on the moon". Stephan has a certain degree of belief over *P*. Initially, Stephan's 'degree of belief that-*P*' [=BD(*P*)] is equal to .72.

Stephan uses two diferent epistemic practices, π_1 and π_2, in order to check whether *P* is true or not; after using π_1 Stephan's DB(*P*)=.4, and after using π_2 Stephan's DB(*P*)=.73.

TASK 1: Suppose *P* is true. Which epistemic, if any, practice is "better" according to Goldman's theory? Show why. Which one, if any, should be given positive credit?

TASK 2: Carry out *TASK 1*, this time supposing that *P* is false.

TASK 3: Formulate a similar problem where two different epistemic practices should both receive negative credit.

- **LAST BUT NOT LEAST, check for mistakes!!**

see you on May 11th!