PHI 1100: Ethics & Critical Thinking

Session 14
March 19th, 2020

Normative Epistemology:
Social Epistemology
Last week was all about evidence:

- **Is it ever acceptable to believe something without evidence?**
  - **Clifford**: no; a belief is only justified if it is formed after considering the maximum amount of evidence possible.
  - **James**: yes; even if it isn’t formed after considering the maximum evidence possible, a belief can be justified by the positive consequences of regarding it as true.

- **Are we obligated to verify/revise our beliefs in light of new evidence?**
  - **Clifford**: yes; we should not act upon a behavior until we are highly confident that our belief is well-supported by evidence.
  - **James**: no; our beliefs are naturally resistant to change so we tend to just reconfirm our existing views, and life forces us to act upon faith instead of firm evidence, but this isn’t blameworthy.

**Now we’ll go into depth about** **testimonial evidence** = information obtained from other people’s speech or writing

- **How do we depend upon other people to gain knowledge?**
  - How much is our intellectual behavior a consequence of our circumstances, instead of our intellectual character?
This session is all about

- **social epistemology**, an approach to questions about belief & knowledge that focuses on the impact of social systems on what we believe

  (In contrast, individualistic outlooks on epistemology treat belief acquisition & the pursuit of knowledge as a solo activity conducted by individuals acting completely independently, without interacting with or consulting anyone else.

  » Descartes, meditating alone in his study & trying to figure out what he can take for granted as absolute truth, is a prime example of someone with an individualist attitude toward knowledge.)

- Social epistemologists take seriously the ideas that
  
  - “man is a social animal” (Aristotle, *Politics*, ~350 BCE)
  - “no man is an island, entire of itself” (John Donne, 1624)

  - ...meaning, human beings cannot thrive alone;
    
    » **we depend upon each other to succeed,** and that includes succeeding in forming true beliefs.
**testimonial evidence** = information obtained from other people’s speech or writing

- Because of its association with witnesses in courtroom settings, we might be prone to thinking of “testimony” exclusively as people reporting their own experience (what they’ve seen or heard), but
  - **testimony** includes any assertion that a person presents as true, with the aim of instilling belief in the reader/hearer

➢ *Many of our beliefs about the world depend upon testimonial evidence.* As Regina Rini notes,

  “Most of our knowledge about the world is secondhand knowledge that comes to us through testimony.

» “After all, we can’t each do all of our own scientific research, or make our own maps of distant cities.” (“How to Fix…”)

Because we can’t possibly investigate everything first-hand, we **all depend on other people to tell us the truth:**
- in fact, you’re doing it right now by reading these slides!
- Nearly everything we learn in school is testimony from teachers, textbook authors, etc.
• Testimony is a bit of a “necessary evil”: we all depend upon it on a daily basis, but there are serious risks involved with testimonial evidence:

  » **unreliability**: despite their best efforts & good intentions, some people’s testimonies may convey false information because they have picked up false beliefs from someone else

  » **dishonesty**: people may be motivated to feed us false information, in order to achieve some goal

    • e.g., fake news misinformation campaigns intend to seed doubt about a political candidate’s character or qualifications,

    • in order to increase the likelihood that people vote for their opponent

According to social epistemologists,

- a huge part of determining what is worth believing is *figuring out whose testimony you can trust.*
Unfortunately, we pick up a lot of beliefs about the world during childhood, before we're aware that some people may not be trustworthy sources of information:

- most likely, we blindly trusted the adults in our lives (parents, teachers, religious leaders, etc.) to teach us the truth,
  • and we unquestioningly took up whatever beliefs they held as our own – some of which we may never bother to reconsider or second-guess.

Philosopher **Bertrand Russell** describes this reality as a threat to our freedom to think independently:

- Most of us “[go] through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of [our era] or [our nation, and from convictions which have grown up in [our] mind[s] without the cooperation or consent of [our] deliberate reason.”

  » (Russell thinks that doing philosophy can free us from this imprisonment, by exposing us to new perspectives & ways of thinking!)
Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (video: bit.ly/2m5c2gj) can help us think about the dangers of our dependence on other people to present the world to us accurately (and non-manipulatively).

– (The Allegory also functions as an explanation of the value of philosophy.)

➢ We’ll relate this story to current discussions in social epistemology about ways in which other people can sway our beliefs:
  • e.g., partisan media, propaganda, fake news, social media algorithms, influence campaigns…
“--Behold! [prisoners] living in a underground den [cave], which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den;

- here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see [in front of] them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads.

Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; » and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which [the puppeteers] show the puppets.”
So: the prisoners have grown up chained in this cave,
- and all they can see are the shadows
cast on the wall in front of them by the puppets
& objects being held between the fire & the wall.

➢ “To [the prisoners]...the truth would be literally
nothing but the shadows
of the images,” Plato explains.

One interpretation:
whatever we are presented with
& exposed to by our society is
what we regard as our reality,

- especially if we’re not
in a position to consider
any other ways of living
  * (e.g., being born into a cult,
  or a totalitarian regime
  fueled by propaganda)
Also like people brainwashed by a cult leader or propaganda,

- **if the prisoners were freed**
  from a lifetime of *indoctrination & deception,*
  they'd struggle to process the idea that *their reality was false,*
  and there exists a *truer, alternative reality:*

- “...see what will naturally follow
  if the prisoners are released and disabused of their error.

  - **At first,** when any of them is **liberated** and compelled suddenly to...look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains;
    » the glare will distress him,
    and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows;”

- ...then **conceive some one saying to him,**
  that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now,
  when he is approaching nearer to being and
  his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision,

  - ....will he not be perplexed?
    » Will he not fancy that the shadows which he formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to him?”
Plato imagines that one of the freed prisoners escapes the cave and witnesses the outside world for the first time.

• “When he approaches the light his eyes will be dazzled, and [at first] he will not be able to see anything at all of what are now called realities.
  
  – …He will require to grow accustomed to the sight of the upper world.
  – …first he will see the shadows best, next the reflections of men & other objects in the water, and then the objects themselves;
  – then he will gaze upon the light of the moon & the stars & the spangled heaven…

  – And when he remembered his old habitation, and the wisdom of the den and his fellow-prisoners, do you not suppose that he would felicitate himself on the change [be grateful he had escaped], and pity them?

» Would he not say with Homer, “Better to be the poor servant of a poor master, and to endure anything, rather than think as they do and live after their manner?”

• …he would rather suffer anything than entertain these false notions and live in this miserable manner.”
Lastly, the escaped prisoner returns to the cave to reveal to the other prisoners how they’ve been deceived about reality.

- (When the allegory is interpreted as an explanation of how philosophy works,
  - the escaped prisoner is a philosopher who seeks the truth instead of just accepting what she has always believed.

  ➢ “Escaping the cave” is a metaphor for liberating ourselves from the ways we are accustomed to seeing & thinking about the world.

Plato concludes the Allegory by writing that

➢ “It is the task of the enlightened [the escaped prisoner] not only to ascend to learning and to see the good, but to be willing to descend again to those prisoners”,
  - to help them understand how they’ve been misled, even if they may attack him for challenging their worldview.

  - So: doing philosophy isn’t just about personal enlightenment;
    » it’s also about sharing your insights with others to help them question what they’ve taken for granted.)
C. Thi Nguyen explores why it seems like people can live in completely different epistemic worlds, accepting drastically different sets of “facts” as their reality.

According to Nguyen, our social network can function as an *epistemic bubble*:

> “an informational network from which relevant voices have been excluded by omission”

» That omission might be purposeful: we might be selectively avoiding contact with contrary views because...they make us uncomfortable.

- As social scientists tell us, we like to engage in selective exposure, seeking out information that confirms our own worldview.”

» “But that omission can also be entirely inadvertent.

- ...our Facebook friends [or Twitter followers, etc.] tend to share our views and interests.

- When we [treat our social media networks] as our information feeds, we tend to miss out on contrary views and run into exaggerated degrees of agreement.”
Nguyen describes two problems with epistemic bubbles:

1) When we surround ourselves with people who agree with us, we may not have access to certain types of knowledge.
- “A social network composed entirely of incredibly smart, obsessive opera fans would deliver all the information I could want about the opera scene,
- but it would fail to clue me in to the fact that, say, my country had been infested by a rising tide of neo-Nazis.”
  - “Each individual person in my network might be superbly reliable about her particular informational patch but, as an aggregate structure, [this] network lacks what Sanford Goldberg…calls ‘coverage-reliability’.
  - It doesn’t deliver to me a sufficiently broad & representative coverage of all the relevant information.”

» So: even if every individual in your social network provides trustworthy testimony about the things they know,
  - the combination of all of these individuals may not be able to convey the facts about something important that you ought to know about.
Nguyen describes **two problems with epistemic bubbles**:

2. **Encountering people who corroborate our beliefs will tend to enhance our confidence in our beliefs** – even if we’re encountering these people because we’ve surrounded ourselves with people who agree with us.

   “Looking to others for corroboration is a basic method for checking whether one has reasoned well or badly.

   ➢ But **not all forms of corroboration are meaningful**.

   – …Suppose that I believe that the Paleo diet is the greatest diet of all time.  
   – I assemble a Facebook group called ‘Great Health Facts!’ & fill it only with people who already believe that Paleo is the best diet.

   » **The fact that everybody in that group agrees with me** about Paleo shouldn’t increase my confidence level one bit.

   » …they actually might have reached their conclusions independently – but their agreement can be entirely explained by my method of selection.

   » The group’s unanimity is simply an echo of my selection criterion.”
“Luckily, …we can pop an epistemic bubble simply by exposing its members to the information & arguments that they’ve missed.
  • But echo chambers are a far more pernicious and robust phenomenon."

➢ “An ‘echo chamber’ is a social structure from which other relevant voices have been actively discredited.
  • [Whereas] an epistemic bubble merely omits contrary views, an echo chamber brings its members to actively distrust outsiders.”

People inside an echo chamber “are isolated not by selective exposure [to information], but by changes in who they accept as authorities, experts & trusted sources.
– They hear, but dismiss, outside voices.
– Their worldview [persists despite] exposure to…outside voices because their belief system has prepared them for such intellectual onslaught.”

» …meaning: it’s very hard for someone in an echo chamber to even consider beliefs that contradict their own (let alone change their beliefs),
  • because they’ve been taught to reject outside views.
“One might be tempted to think that the solution is...to start thinking for ourselves. 

But that kind of **radical intellectual autonomy is a pipe dream,**” says Nguyen.

» “...we are irredeemably dependent on each other in almost every domain of knowledge.

Think about how we trust others in every aspect of our daily lives.

• Driving a car depends on trusting the work of engineers & mechanics; taking medicine depends on trusting the decisions of doctors, chemists and biologists.
  
  • Even the experts depend on vast networks of other experts.

– ...we depend on a vastly complicated social structure of trust.

» **We must trust each other, but,** as the philosopher Annette Baier says, **that trust makes us vulnerable.**

• Echo chambers operate as a kind of **social parasite** on that vulnerability,
  
  • taking advantage of our epistemic condition & social dependency.”
“Perversely, exposure to outsiders with contrary views can thus increase echo-chamber members’ confidence in their insider sources, and hence their attachment to their worldview.

- The philosopher Endre Begby calls this effect ‘evidential pre-emption’.
  - What’s happening is a kind of intellectual judo, in which the power & enthusiasm of contrary voices are turned against those contrary voices…”

  *Translation*: the more intensely people outside the echo chamber try to tell those inside that their beliefs are wrong,
  » the more reason those inside the echo chamber have to believe that the outsiders are crazy & untrustworthy.

To illustrate this, Nguyen asks to think about a teenager who was born into an echo chamber (e.g., a cult):
  » “Every part of her belief system is tuned to reject the contrary testimony of outsiders.
    • She has a reason, on each encounter, to dismiss any incoming contrary evidence.
    • ..if she decided to suspend any one of her particular beliefs & reconsider it on its own, then all her background beliefs would likely just reinstate the problematic belief.”
Recall how Descartes realized that since his beliefs are all interrelated (built on top of one another), he couldn’t abandon them each one at a time, but rather had to reject them all & start over fresh:

- an “epistemic reboot”, in Nguyen’s words.

Nguyen says the echo-chambered teenager also “needs to throw everything away, and start over again”:

- “…to undo the effects of an echo chamber, the member should temporarily suspend all her beliefs – in particular whom & what she trusts – and start over again from scratch.
  
  » ...she must begin afresh socially...reconsider[ing] all possible sources of information with a presumptively equanimous eye.
  
  » She must take the posture of a cognitive newborn, open and equally trusting to all outside sources.
  
  » ...after the social reboot, [her] trust will not be narrowly confined & deeply conditioned by the particular people they happened to be raised by.”
“Such a profound deep cleanse of one’s whole belief system seems to be what’s actually required to escape.

- Look at the many stories of people leaving cults and echo chambers.” (Nguyen)

Take, for example, the story of Derek Black in Florida – raised by a neo-Nazi father, and groomed from childhood to be a neo-Nazi leader. Black left the movement by, basically, performing a social reboot. He completely abandoned everything he’d believed in, and spent years building a new belief system from scratch.

Stories of actual escapes from echo chambers often turn on particular encounters – moments when the echo-chambered individual starts to trust somebody on the outside. Black’s is case in point. By high school, he was already something of a star on neo-Nazi media, with his own radio talk-show. He went on to college, openly neo-Nazi, and was shunned by almost every other student in his community college. But then Matthew Stevenson, a Jewish fellow undergraduate, started inviting Black to Stevenson’s Shabbat dinners. In Black’s telling, Stevenson was unfailingly kind, open and generous, and slowly earned Black’s trust. This was the seed, says Black, that led to a massive intellectual upheaval – a slow-dawning realisation of the depths to which he had been misled. Black went through a years-long personal transformation, and is now an anti-Nazi spokesperson.

interviews of Derek Black: on.cc.com/2RZDjQh, n.pr/2BcavtF
Nguyen suggests that

- **If you’re dealing with someone who seems to be in an echo chamber,**
  - you’re more likely to be able to persuade them by identifying values you share than expecting them to agree with reasons you present.
    - (E.g., Black & Stevenson were able to find a common ground of respect for each other’s kindness and intelligence, which allowed them to trust each other despite their vast ideological differences.)

- This backs up our previous observations about how people are naturally resistant to changing their beliefs:
  - **especially when a belief becomes deeply intertwined with someone’s identity,**
    - it is extremely hard to relinquish it, and they will typically go to great lengths to protect it from challenges.

- **video** (“I was in a cult for 16 years. Ask me anything.”): bit.ly/2S9Xb0A
“Many people have claimed that we have entered an era of ‘post-truth’.

- Not only do some political figures
  seem to speak with a blatant disregard for the facts,
  - but their supporters seem utterly unswayed by evidence.”

On the first full day of the Trump administration, White House press
secretary Sean Spicer admonished the news media for reporting that the
crowd that witnessed Trump’s inauguration was smaller than other recent
inauguration crowds, claiming, “This was the largest audience to ever
witness an inauguration — period — both in person and around the globe.”
According to Nguyen,

- “The apparent ‘post-truth’ attitude can be explained as the result of the manipulations of trust wrought by echo chambers.
  - We don’t have to attribute a complete disinterest in facts, evidence or reason to explain the post-truth attitude.”

- Instead, what appears to be a rejection of facts can be explained by people on opposite sides of the political spectrum having “a vastly divergent set of trusted authorities.”

- “Listen to what it actually sounds like when people reject the plain facts – it doesn’t sound like brute irrationality.
  » One side points out a piece of economic data; the other side rejects that data by rejecting its source.
  » They think that newspaper is biased, or the academic elites generating the data are corrupt.

- An echo chamber doesn’t destroy their members’ interest in the truth;
  - it merely manipulates whom they trust & changes whom they accept as trustworthy sources and institutions.”
“...in many ways, echo-chamber members are following reasonable & rational procedures of enquiry.

- They’re engaging in critical reasoning.
- They’re questioning, they’re evaluating sources for themselves, they’re assessing different pathways to information.
- They are critically examining those who claim expertise & trustworthiness, using what they already know about the world.
  - It’s simply that their basis for evaluation – their background beliefs about whom to trust – are radically different.
    - They are not irrational, but systemically misinformed about where to place their trust.”

Nguyen is encouraging us not to automatically view people we vehemently disagree with as stupid or malevolent:

» they may be doing the best they can with the limited evidence available in their echo chamber.

- As in the story of Derek Black, antagonizing these people won’t change their views, but showing them goodwill *might*. 
So – Nguyen argues that many of the people we disagree with place their trust in a very different set of authorities than us.

– There are benign disagreements about facts, but we must distinguish these from:

• ill-intentioned, deliberate manipulations of people’s beliefs (e.g., misinformation campaigns)

• efforts to weaken public confidence in the idea of truth (to get people to accept whatever is forced upon them)

• e.g., through “Orwellian doublespeak” – intentionally ambiguous or misleading speech, like that of the Party leaders in George Orwell’s dystopian novel 1984

Hyper-partisanship as the result of echo chambers is far from ideal,

• but a bigger (and more avoidable) threat is the calculated use of power to misinform us, as part of a sociopolitical agenda.