This is unit lectures. I hope they will help you answer those questions above.

* **KNOWLEDGE: IS IT POSSIBLE?**

**Epistemology** is primarily concerned with two questions: What is knowledge? and Is knowledge possible? There is a difference between knowing how to do something, like typing or reading, and knowing that something is true. Plato used the term ‘techne’ for skill or knowing how and the term ‘episteme’ for the kind of knowledge in which claims can be true or false. Philosophers are mainly interested in what it is to know that something is true.Plato suggested in several of his dialogues that this type of ‘knowledge’ be defined as justified true belief. He referred to knowledge as "correct belief together with an account." For well over two thousand years, this definition has been reinforced and accepted by subsequent philosophers. Some philosophers have offered modified criteria for knowledge; however, there is no general consensus that is more widely accepted than Plato's justifiability, truth, and belief. So, we can say that there are three requirements for claiming that we have knowledge about the truth of a particular proposition. Consider each requirement one at a time. You may claim to know that Texas is the largest state in the U.S. that begins with the letter ‘T.’ It would be very odd to say that you both ‘know’ that it is and, because you have some doubts about which states begin with ‘T,’ you don't really believe that Texas is the largest state beginning with ‘T.’ So, to claim knowledge of the truth of a proposition you must believe that it is true. Obviously, believing that something is true and even feeling very certain that a proposition is true do not make it true. We are all fallible. We make mistakes. We believe things that aren't true. Truth is the second criteria for knowledge.We may think that we know things that we simply don't know. In other words, something that we believe with great confidence may turn out to be false. For example, one might strongly believe that the lead singer of the Irish band U2 is Sonny Bono. He might, on the basis of that strong belief, say that he knows that Sonny Bono is the lead singer. He might be so confident that he is willing to bet his friend $100 that Sonny Bono is the lead singer of U2. His friend may tell him that he is confused. She may tell him that the lead singer of U2 is actually Paul David Hewson. She may tell him that his nickname is Bono Vox and that he goes by Bono. Surely the best explanation is that she is correct and that he is simply confused. He may have thought he knew that Sonny Bono was the lead singer, but his belief was false. Therefore, it was not genuine knowledge. One cannot know something that is false.  
  
As it turns out, understanding what is required to be completely or fully justified in the belief that something is true is difficult. Plato was unable to give a clarification to the concept of an ‘account’ that was satisfactory. The concept of a full justification is not very clear. Justification, of course, is a matter of degree. Some beliefs are more justified than others. The degree of justification involves the evidence, reasons, facts, etc. that warrant the belief. So, the degree of justification seems to depend upon how likely it is that the belief is mistaken. That, as it turns out, is a very complicated matter. So, while there is considerable agreement that knowledge is justified true belief, current epistemology is focused most on the difficult question of what a full justification would be.

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**KNOWLEDGE AND SKEPTICISM**

Philosophical **skepticism** is a position with a long history in philosophy. For our purposes, it is only necessary to understand that skeptics accept that the criterion for knowledge is justified true belief. However, they claim that these three criteria can never be fully met. Therefore, they claim that knowledge with certainty is not possible. In other words, all claims to knowledge are impossible because complete justification is possible only if one cannot possibly be mistaken. For skeptics, the probability of being mistaken must be zero. According to skeptics, there is always room for doubt. We can always be mistaken about any belief whatsoever.  
  
Our beliefs can be derived from sense experience (e.g. I see the tree and I smell the rain; I am sitting in the kitchen typing at my computer).  
Our beliefs can be derived from reason (e.g. If all A's are B, and X is an A, then X is B; the proposition that no straight lines are curved).  
Our beliefs can be derived from introspection (e.g. I am experiencing pain; I desire a drink of water).  
  
Many skeptics will admit that beliefs derived from reason and introspection are reliable and we are justified in believing them. Believing them and knowing them are not, however, the same thing. They argue that complete justification involves it being impossible that one is mistaken. In other words, there can be no possibility of doubt.  
  
Rene Descartes, who was not ultimately a skeptic, used this criterion for being completely justified in a belief. He said that only beliefs that are certain and cannot be doubted can be known and they can only be known if and only if the believer cannot possibly be mistaken. So, Descartes said that to have knowledge with certainty, we must put aside everything that can be doubted. Descartes's doubt is not authentic doubt; he did not really question whether he was indeed "seated by the fire" in his "winter dressing gown." His doubt is rightly called methodological doubt; that is, he wants to find some premise or axiom that cannot possibly be doubted as the foundation for scientific knowledge. So, if he finds that a belief can be doubted, it cannot be used and must be set aside.Empirical truths are derived from sense experience. Descartes wondered if there was any way to doubt those things that we ‘know’ from our sensations. Descartes asks, "how could I deny that I possess these hands and this body, and withal escape being classed with persons in a state of insanity, whose brains are so disordered and clouded by dark bilious vapors . . . ?" However, he imagined with his famous dream argument that he could be simply dreaming those things. Again, he didn't actually believe that he was dreaming. He simply said that he could not be sure because in the past he had been fooled while dreaming. In short, there is no criterial mark to distinguish a waking experience from a dreaming experience. Rachels makes the same point with the ‘brain in the vat’ example and points out that contemporary movies like *The Matrix* and *Total Recall* have exploited this seventeenth century idea of Descartes. In the final analysis, the dream argument shows that everything that we know from our senses cannot be trusted because it can be doubted.  
  
As we have mentioned above, some beliefs are derived from the operation of our mind that are independent of sense experience. Descartes points out that even if he is dreaming, then 3+2=5, and a square has four sides. So, at first he suggests that we can know these necessary truths. However, he questions if that can possibly be doubted. He next invents the famous evil demon or evil genius argument. According to Descartes, if it is possible that there is a good and loving God, then it is at least possible that there exists some powerful demon that could be deceiving him and manipulating his thoughts. Surely, this demon could deceive him about necessary truths.This leads to a sort of skepticism that recognizes that as long as our criterion for knowing something with certainty is that it cannot possibly be doubted, then we cannot have knowledge derived from either our senses or our reasoning. Descartes attempted to solve this problem by asserting that even if he was being deceived, it was he who was doubting. It was he who was thinking. In other words, he could be certain that he was having thoughts and experiences even if they could not be trusted. After all, if he did not exist, then he could not be having the thoughts. So, he argued that since there is thinking, there must be a thinker. Since there is doubting, there must be a doubter. He expressed it in one of the most famous propositions in the history of philosophy: "I think, therefore I am." or *cogito, ergo sum*.As Rachels points out, in order to really solve the problem which his methodological doubt had created, Descartes needed to use a theological solution. He had to prove that God is a good and loving God, who would not deceive him. Unfortunately, he was unable to offer a proof that did not make use of truths of reason (which had already been called into doubt by the possibility of an evil genius). In fact, his famous *cogito* is a truth of reason (there is thinking, so there is a thinker). By his own argument, such truths were doubtful as long as there exists the possibility of the evil genius. He is reasoning himself to the conclusion that reason can be trusted, which is circular. This is known as the ‘Cartesian circle.’Rachels discusses three other attempts to solve the problem of how we have knowledge of the world: idealism, phenomenalism, and naive realism. Rachels ultimately concludes that none of these is acceptable. David Hume has shown that empiricism inevitably leads to an utter and total skepticism. According to Hume, we can have knowledge of pure mathematics because it rests only on the relations of ideas, without presuming anything about the world. However, knowledge of the world is not within our reach.  
  
Hume believed that the most reasonable position is a ‘mitigated’ skepticism that humbly accepts the limitations of human knowledge while pursuing the legitimate aims of math and science. Of course, when we are not being philosophical, we will be thrown back upon the natural beliefs of our ordinary life, even if those beliefs are ultimately irrational and without justification. This seems to be what Rachels has in mind when he talks about the natural theory. He says that this leaves us, at least philosophically, in a somewhat awkward position. To Descartes's question of "What can we know with absolute certainty?" we must respond that demanding absolute certainty is misguided.