

# Class Seven - Epistemology in the Digital Age

## Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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### 1 Epistemology and Why It Matters

- **Descartes's Epistemological Project:** Descartes's project in the *Meditations* is one of *epistemology*, articulating the justificatory grounds for our beliefs about the world.
- **Knowledge and Democracy:** As we discussed last quarter, one of the crucial conditions of a functioning democracy is that the participants of that democracy be well-informed.
- **News from Social Media:** Most people get their news from the internet, and, in particular, from articles posted on social media.
- **The Epistemological Problem of Fake News:** There is a large industry of the creation of disinformation, deliberately false or misleading news, meant to sway public opinion and it has had a huge effect on American democracy.
  - For instance, 70 percent of Republicans believe that there was widespread voter fraud in the 2020 elections.

We like to think that we're better off, epistemologically speaking, than those who've been misled into widespread false beliefs by fake news, but how do we know? Answering this question requires doing some epistemology.

### 2 A Modern Skeptical Problematic

- **The Basic Question:** How can we tell if a certain news story is real or fake? Clearly, check if it comes from a trusted source. But how do we know, however, if a source is to be trusted? It seems that there is a potential problem here, given where we get the vast majority of our information.
  - Say, I want to know, for instance, if News-site A is to be trusted. How will I determine this?
  - Presumably, I will google it, arriving at News-site B that says A is to be trusted. This helps me only if I know that B is to be trusted. How do I determine this?
  - Presumably, I will google it as well, arriving at News-site C . . .
  - It seems that there are two possibilities here, if I just continue this strategy:
    1. **Circle:** I go in a circle. For instance, I check A with B, I check B with C, and I check C with A again.
      - \* This seems particularly likely with "information bubbles," where we have a set of sources (often affiliated with some sort of political leaning) that refer to one another as reliable and refer to members of an alternate bubble (affiliated with an opposing political leaning) as unreliable.
    2. **Infinite Regress:** I go on forever. For instance, I check A with B, B with C, C with D, and so on.

Both possibilities, it seem, don't actually give us sufficient grounds to think that A is to be trusted. Is there a third option? It seems so:

3. **External Stopping Point:** Check the accuracy of the news for yourself, for instance, by finding clips of the reported events online so that you can see for yourself what actually happened.
- **The Problem of Deepfakes:** It may seem that this third option is the way to determine whether a news story is genuine, but now even video clips are capable of being “deepfaked.”
    - Right now, deepfakes aren’t that prevalent, and it’s relatively easy to tell if something’s deepfaked. But this will soon change, and it seems then that we’ll be in quite a skeptical predicament.
    - **Examples:** One of these is real and one of these is fake:
      - \* <https://youtu.be/qQgXEkL3NV4?t=108>
      - \* <https://youtu.be/iyiOVUbsPcM>
 Deepfakes this good aren’t widespread yet, but they soon will be.
  - **Descartes’s Restricted Conception of Experience:** Recall Descartes’s restricted sense of the term “sensory perception” or “sensory experience”:
 

“I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking,” (24).
  - **The Restricted Conception of Audio/Visual Evidence:** Given the existence of deepfakes, we can make the same point about audio and video clips, which seem to show certain events. We can no longer just say, for instance, that a given video is a video of Tom Cruise telling a story about Gorbachev or jumping on a couch on the Oprah show. Rather, we should say that the video is one that *appears* to show Tom Cruise telling a story about Gorbachev or jumping on a couch on Oprah.
  - **The Predicament:** So, like Descartes, who needs to make a chain of inferences in order to be able to justify his reliance on his sensory experience, we need to make inferences in order to justify our reliance on any video that we see. In particular, we need to know that it comes from a trusted source (that’s what Obama says: <https://youtu.be/iyiOVUbsPcM>). But this puts us right back at the place where we started!
  - **Questions:**
    - What do we think about this sort of epistemological predicament that we might soon find ourselves in? Will we have a way of knowing for sure whether some news story we find is actually real?
    - Even if we are able to find our way out of this epistemological predicament ourselves, might many others who aren’t as epistemically careful as us fall prey to widespread false belief? What result would that have on our democratic process?

### 3 Rini on Videos as Testimony

- **Rini’s Characterization of the Basic Problem:** Deepfakes present what she calls a *backstop crisis*.
  - Usually, we can appeal to audio and video recordings to keep our epistemic and particularly our testimonial practices in check. The recording holds ultimate authority.
  - But with the presence of deepfakes, recordings can no longer be taken to have the epistemic authority they need to have in order to play this role.
 

“This is the gravest danger of deepfakes: not that they will trick us into believing false content, but that they will gradually eliminate the epistemic credentials of *all* recordings, to an extent that video and audio no longer serve their passive regulative function in testimonial practice,” (Rini 2020, 8).

- **The Intuitive Characterization of the Evidential Role of Videos:** Intuitively, we are inclined to think of videos as providing *perceptual* evidence rather than *testimonial* evidence.
  - Contrast the evidential role of a painting of a dog with the evidential role of a photograph of that dog. Believing things about the dog on the basis of the painting requires putting trust in the honesty and skill of the painter, but believing things on the basis of the photograph does not.
- **Rini’s Proposal:** Whenever we have an audio/video recording hosted by a news site, for instance, that itself needs to be sourced to someone whom we can rely on testimonially. For instance, if a videojournalist works for a news site, then the epistemological credentials of any videos they produce will rely, in part, on their testimonial authority.
  - **Practical Problem:** What about protecting the anonymity of someone who, for instance, produces videos of atrocities committed by an authoritarian regime?
- **The Basic Upshot of the Proposal:** Insofar as there is no “epistemic backstop” that is completely free of testimonial authority, it seems that, ultimately, our epistemic practices are going to bottom out in testimonial authority—we’ll necessarily need to rely on *trust* of others to claim to have a video only when they really do. But can we trust others?

## 4 Our Next Key Topic

- **Skepticism about Other Minds:** With Descartes, we considered skepticism about the external world—how we can know that the world is as it appears to be in our sensory experience. We’re now going to turn to the question of how we can know that others’ beliefs, desires, and so on are what they seem to be, given the behavior that they outwardly exhibit.