

Extending your learning; being fair-minded; embracing uncertainty

EXTENDING YOUR LEARNING

When we learn new things, it is natural for us to apply our learning *only in a narrow range of contexts*. For instance, in this seminar you have started to learn how to express yourself precisely. And you will find it easy to use what you have learned in your homework exercises and papers for this course. But you will find it hard to think about precision when you are writing papers for other courses; even harder when you are writing emails; harder still when you are speaking in seminar; and nearly impossible when you are being interviewed for a job.

But surely it is worth getting as much as possible from all of your hard-earned expertise! Thus it is useful to reflect carefully on how to extend your learning to new contexts. The warm-up exercises for this week are designed to help you to begin that process – but, to gain the full benefits, you must firmly resolve to continue this process on your own.

Some notes. First, when you apply an old skill to a new context, you must be sensitive to the differences between this new context and the old one. For example, while it is rarely good to be imprecise when you are writing a philosophy paper, it is often wise to be imprecise when you are writing a novel or chatting with your friends.

Moreover, the process of extending your learning is not quick. Indeed, the process takes a lifetime. As well it should: learning is an essential part of a life well-lived. So I encourage you to be willing to fail, to reflect on what went wrong, and to try again. Huzzah!

BEING FAIR-MINDED

It is a natural human tendency to spend a lot of time seeking evidence *for* one's prior views and to spend very little time seeking evidence *against* one's prior views. All of us do this – your friends, you, and I. But this tendency can be very harmful for philosophical inquiry: it can lead us to harden our prior prejudices instead of molding our beliefs to the evidence.

Thus I encourage you to cultivate the intellectual virtue of *fair-mindedness*. This entails recognizing the merits of opposing views; acknowledging the demerits of your own views; thinking carefully about how your opponents might respond to your objections; and – most importantly of all! – being willing to change your mind in light of the evidence.

My most basic suggestion for how to cultivate fair-mindedness is this: *make a deliberate effort to adopt other perspectives*. For example, when we encounter an argument whose conclusion we do not like, we all have a natural tendency to hunt diligently for objections to the argument. But, ordinarily, we will not invest nearly as much energy into trying to repair the argument or rebut the objections. So consciously set aside time to think about what your opponents might say, without worrying what you will say in response.

Of course, I hope that you will practice the virtue of fair-mindedness in seminar. But do not stop there! You will develop enormously as a thinker, and indeed as a human being, if you practice fair-mindedness in your ordinary life.

We all crave *certainty*. We want to know for sure about the nature of goodness, knowledge, perception, and reality. And indeed there are many things that we would like to know for sure in our non-philosophical lives.

However, I believe that (rational) certainty can almost never be achieved. *Perhaps* I can be certain that $1 + 1 = 2$ or that *modus ponens* is a valid argument form. But I cannot even be absolutely certain that I have hands – for all I know, I am a bodiless soul being deceived by a Cartesian demon. Much less can I be certain of any interesting philosophical truths.

These assertions about certainty are themselves philosophical claims, and so they are of course open to dispute. But I find these claims to be very plausible (though I am not certain of them!), and perhaps you will feel the same way. In any case, I will suggest to you a way of thinking about philosophy that pairs well with this way of thinking about the scarcity of certainty.

I do not find it useful to think of philosophical arguments as providing *decisive reasons* to accept or reject various views.¹ (This is true even of philosophical arguments that are deductively valid, since we do not usually have decisive reasons to accept the premises of those arguments.) Instead, I prefer to think of philosophical arguments as revealing *costs or benefits* of various views. These costs or benefits are sometimes quite large, but even so they might end up being outweighed by even larger costs or benefits elsewhere, as revealed to us by other philosophical arguments.

Thus, I see philosophy as a *holistic* enterprise. We cannot properly assess any theory simply by looking at one argument for or against it. We must instead consider the vast range of costs and benefits of the theory, in comparison with the costs and benefits of competing theories. If a theory is substantially better than its rivals, then we should treat it as being much more likely to be true than those rivals. But we should not be certain that this theory is true, nor should we be certain that rival theories are false.

Relatedly, I see philosophy as a *provisional* enterprise: we might at any point discover new evidence or new arguments that overturn our earlier verdicts. By analogy, observe that for centuries, scientists had massive and overwhelming evidence for a Newtonian theory of physics. Nevertheless, starting in the twentieth century, new evidence was uncovered that undermined this theory and supported a relativistic, indeterministic theory instead. If centuries of accumulated research in physics could be overturned by new evidence, then how can we expect to find unshakeable theories in philosophy?

So I think that we should embrace the uncertain, provisional character of our epistemic situation. Yes, we cannot often have certainty. But we *can* often have very good evidence. Let us therefore follow that light as far as we can.

Bonus readings. If you are interested in reading more about certainty, then I invite you to consult Eric Schwitzgebel's 2017 paper "1% skepticism" and Sarah Moss's 2019 paper "Full belief and loose speech." If you are interested in reading more about the philosophy as a holistic enterprise, then I invite you to consult W. V. O. Quine's 1951 paper "Two dogmas of empiricism." Perhaps it is worth mentioning that Moss's paper, in particular, changed my life.

¹ With the possible exception of certain logical or mathematical arguments that are literally proofs.