Philosophy Higher: 
Epistemology Section 1 – Introduction to Epistemology

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Recommended textbooks on epistemology (these are much clearer and more informative than the support material! The support material does list one textbook (Fumerton) that may also be useful):


2. Michael Williams, Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology (Oxford University Press, 2001). [More difficult than Morton but very insightful and thought-provoking; I learned a great deal from it. Williams is quite an important and polemical figure in epistemology].

Also: feel free to look at my website for PY1002 Knowledge and Reality, which contains lecture handouts as well as reading list etc. This is linked via my homepage (URL above) and is at this URL: http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~sjp7/PY1002/PY1002.htm

GENERAL THOUGHTS ON EPISTEMOLOGY SECTION 1

The idea of section 1 seems to be to give a general overview of epistemology before looking in more detail at a specific historical figure.

Consists of: 1. The Tripartite Theory of Knowledge
2. Problems with Justified True Belief
3. Scepticism, Rationalism and Empiricism

Students investigate three questions while considering the above:

i. Why are knowledge claims a problem in philosophy?
ii. What is knowledge?
iii. Can knowledge claims be justified?

First thought about this: Just giving definitions for (1) and (3) is pretty trivial; but saying something more interesting about them, as well as dealing with (2), is asking an awful lot in the recommended 4 hours of teaching!!!
**Recommendation:** In discussing Descartes and/or Hume one will encounter scepticism (in two forms, one for Descartes and one for Hume), rationalism (Descartes) and empiricism (Hume). So I wouldn’t try to cover too much of these topics in the initial four hours – better to get clear about (1) and (2) and just give a brief description of scepticism, rationalism and empiricism, saving more detailed discussion until you look at Descartes and/or Hume.

1. **TRIPARTITE THEORY**

   S knows that p if and only if:
   
   1. p is true
   2. S believes that p
   3. S’s belief that p is justified

   It would be a good idea to go through these three conditions in turn, explaining why one would find them plausible or mentioning possible objections.

   For example:

   1. We wouldn’t say someone knows that p when p is false. What would be the point of knowing if knowledge could be false?

   2. Most philosophers accept the belief condition (though as a matter of fact Timothy Williamson has recently argued (in *Knowledge and its Limits* (OUP 2000)) that knowledge is not belief plus something else but is instead a different kind of state that does not involve belief at all. But there’s no need to get into this!). But some alleged problem cases exist, e.g. someone who is reliably able to give correct answers to questions even though they feel as though they are guessing.

   3. Justification: suppose you can distinguish male chicks from female chicks very reliably by sight but you are not aware of seeing anything that distinguishes them – you just somehow ‘know’ (such people – trained ‘chicken sexers’ – really exist). If justification is something that one would always be aware of then such a person seems to lack justification, yet one might have the intuition that they nonetheless know whether the chick is male or female.

2. **PROBLEMS WITH JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF**

   The section of the support material in this section prior to the discussion of Gettier cases is rather odd because it introduces scepticism (of the ‘brain-in-a-vat’ kind based on Descartes’ Evil Demon), which isn’t obviously a problem for the tripartite definition rather than a problem for knowledge as a whole (which is not to deny that some other definitions of knowledge might allow one to resist scepticism).

   I think it might be a little confusing to present this kind of scepticism as a problem for the tripartite account, unless one is very clear that one is taking the attitude that any definition of knowledge that allows sceptical arguments to work is thereby a mistaken definition (but this might well seem a problematic way to argue).
Gettier cases

The Gettier case in the support material isn’t bad. I would NOT use Gettier’s own examples – they’re unnecessarily complex and might be confusing to anyone who doesn’t have a feel for logic (they rely on a technical use of ‘or’ and ‘and’).

Some other useful Gettier cases (I use these in lectures):

1. Unbeknown to you I have an identical twin. The twin enters the room and on seeing this you form the justified belief ‘Simon is in the room’. As it happens, I’m sitting at the back of the room where you hadn’t seen me, so your justified belief is true (but it’s not knowledge).

2. What looks like a window is really a TV screen showing images of the outside world recorded a week ago. You look, and form the justified belief ‘it is raining’. This happens to be true.

3. SCEPTICISM, RATIONALISM AND EMPIRICISM

The support material strikes me as rather unclear on this; it doesn’t give clear definitions of scepticism, empiricism or rationalism, and is expressed in a way that might mislead.

For example, when empiricism is introduced it is presented as though it were the contrary of scepticism of the senses, and this is potentially rather misleading. Empiricism is not simply the view that scepticism of the senses is mistaken. This would make Descartes an empiricist! (Remember that Descartes ends up rejecting scepticism).

Also, a priori knowledge is described as knowledge that ‘comes before experience’ (p. 21), and this struck me as misleading – better to say that a priori knowledge is knowledge that does not rest on experience for its justification (or, if we reject the need for justification, knowledge that can be had independently from experience).

Here are the definitions I use in undergraduate teaching:

SCEPTICISM: Knowledge is impossible

(The support material talks a lot about sceptical doubts and not being able to rely on our senses or on reason, but it doesn’t make the above definition clear.)

The difference between empiricism and rationalism tends to be more a difference in emphasis. Each position admits of a number of variations, but we can still give broad definitions:

EMPIRICISM: Experience is the main (or only) source of knowledge

RATIONALISM: Reasoning is the main (or only) source of knowledge
Plato was a rare example of an extreme rationalist who held that the only genuine knowledge was acquired through reason; but most rationalists accept both a priori and a posteriori knowledge. So, however, do some empiricists (e.g. 'logical empiricists' in the early twentieth century, who held that all true sentences were either analytic, and thus in a certain way trivial, or else verifiable by patterns of sensations).

SOME THOUGHTS ON DISCUSSING SCEPTICISM

1. Students are sometimes too easily convinced by sceptical arguments! Scepticism ought to seem very hard to believe.

2. On the other hand, one can too easily 'reject scepticism without refuting it' (as Russell put it)

3. Students don’t always appreciate that one cannot just accept scepticism and carry on with one’s life on the assumption that one’s beliefs are probably true (even if they aren’t known).

Why not? Because many sceptical arguments affect the justification or reasons that one can give for one’s beliefs just as much as they affect knowledge (Michael Williams’s book is good on this issue).

Consequently if scepticism were true we would have no reason for believing one thing rather than another. As Bertrand Russell put it, if scepticism is true:

There is no intellectual difference between sanity and insanity. The lunatic who believes that he is a poached egg is to be condemned solely on the ground that he is in a minority.

[History of Western Philosophy (Routledge, 2000; first published 1946), p. 646]

Sometimes students feel that it wouldn’t matter if Evil Demon/Brain-in-a-Vat (cf. The Matrix) scenarios were true – they say that since one would never know the difference, why does it even matter? A case sometimes worth discussing in relation to this is the false friend scenario. Suppose all the people you think are your friends are just actors that are paid to pretend they are your friends (there’s a film called The Truman Show that’s a bit like this). Even if one could never discover this, so that all of one’s experiences would be the same as those of someone with real friends, one might nonetheless have the intuition that this matters.