

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

2.1 Different Senses of Knowing

Before we can start to explore the arguments developed by different philosophers in the search for knowledge, we first need to understand what philosophers mean by 'knowledge'. Traditionally, there are three different types of knowledge: practical knowledge: knowledge that is skills-based, e.g. being able to drive or use a computer knowledge by acquaintance: knowledge that doesn't involve facts but familiarity with someone or an objects, e.g. I know my mother, I know what an apple looks like factual knowledge: knowledge based on fact, e.g. I know that the sun rises every morning – I know it is true. Philosophers are mostly interested in factual knowledge because they are trying to understand how we can achieve truth about the world.

One of the first philosophers to attempt a definition of knowledge was the Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. One of Plato's main concerns was to distinguish knowledge from belief. He gave the example of two guides, one who knows the road to a certain destination, and the other who just uses guesswork. Both guides arrive at their destination but which one is more reliable? Most people would argue that the guide who has expertise is more reliable. This is why Plato argues that true belief gives us knowledge of the world only by coincidence. It is never really certain and could change at any time. For example, I may believe in aliens and aliens may actually exist, but if I cannot give an adequate reason for my claim. I can't really call it knowledge. Plato argues that for a factual claim to be knowledge, it has to be a belief which is true and justified. His definition of knowledge is therefore that it is must be a justified true belief.

Almost every debate in epistemology is in some way related to knowledge. Most generally, "knowledge" is a familiarity, awareness, or understanding of someone or something, which might include facts (propositional knowledge), skills (procedural or how-to knowledge), or objects (acquaintance knowledge). Philosophers tend to draw an important distinction between three different senses of knowing something: "knowing that" (knowing the truth of propositions), "knowing how" (understanding how to perform certain actions), and "knowing by acquaintance" (directly perceiving an object, being familiar with it, or otherwise coming into contact with it). Epistemology is primarily concerned with the first of these forms of knowledge, propositional knowledge.

All three senses of knowing can be seen in our ordinary use of the word. In mathematics, you can know *that* $2 + 2 = 4$, but there is also knowing *how* to add two numbers, and knowing a *person* (e.g., knowing other persons, or knowing oneself), *place* (e.g., one's hometown), *thing* (e.g., cars), or *activity* (e.g., addition).¹³ While these distinctions are not explicit in English, they are explicitly made in other languages, including French, Portuguese, Spanish, Romanian, German and Dutch (although some languages related to English have been

¹³ "Formal Representations of Belief" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Retrieved October 24, 2021.

said to retain these verbs, such as Scots). The theoretical interpretation and significance of these linguistic issues remains controversial.

In his paper book *Problems of Philosophy*, Bertrand Russell brought a great deal of attention to the distinction between “knowledge by description” and “knowledge by acquaintance.”¹⁴ Gilbert Ryle is similarly credited with bringing more attention to the distinction between knowing how and knowing that in *The Concept of Mind*.¹⁵ In *Personal Knowledge*, Michael Polanyi argues for the epistemological relevance of knowledge how and knowledge that; using the example of the act of balance involved in riding a bicycle, he suggests that the theoretical knowledge of the physics involved in maintaining a state of balance cannot substitute for the practical knowledge of how to ride, and that it is important to understand how both are established and grounded.¹⁶ This position is essentially Ryle’s, who argued that a failure to acknowledge the distinction between “knowledge that” and “knowledge how” leads to infinite regress.¹⁷

2.2 *A priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge

One of the most important distinctions in epistemology is between what can be known *a priori* (independently of experience) and what can be known *a posteriori* (through experience). The terms originate from the Analytic methods of Aristotle’s *Organon*, and may be roughly defined as follows:¹⁸

- *A priori* knowledge is knowledge that is known independently of experience (that is, it is non-empirical, or arrived at before experience, usually by reason). It will henceforth be acquired through anything that is independent from experience.
- *A posteriori* knowledge is knowledge that is known by experience (that is, it is empirical, or arrived at through experience).

Views that emphasize the importance of *a priori* knowledge are generally classified as rationalist. Views that emphasize the importance of *a posteriori* knowledge are generally classified as empiricist.

2.3 Conditions of Knowledge

The traditional definition of knowledge as handed down from Plato is: justified true belief.

2.3.1 Belief

¹⁴ B. Russell, *Problem of Philosophy*, <https://www.sparknotes.com/russell/problem-of-philosophy/>

¹⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/concept-of-mind/>

¹⁶ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, <https://www.giffordlectures.org/personal-knowledge>.

¹⁷ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*.

¹⁸ Cf. Bernardete Seth, *The Being of the Beautiful* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984),169.

One of the core concepts in epistemology is *belief*. A belief is an attitude that a person holds regarding anything that he takes to be true.¹⁹ For instance, to believe that snow is white is comparable to accepting the truth of the proposition “snow is white”. Beliefs can be *occurrent* (example, a person actively thinking “snow is white”), or they can be *dispositional* (example, a person who if asked about the color of snow would assert “snow is white”). While there is no universal agreement about the nature of belief, most contemporary philosophers hold the view that a disposition to express belief *B* qualifies as holding the belief *B*.²⁰ There are various different ways that contemporary philosophers have tried to describe beliefs, including as representations of ways that the world could be, as dispositions to act as if certain things are true, as interpretive schemes for making sense of someone’s actions, or as mental states that fill a particular function.²¹

Some have also attempted to offer significant revisions to our notion of belief, including eliminativists about belief who argue that there is no phenomenon in the natural world which corresponds to our folk psychological concept of belief; and formal epistemologists who aim to replace our bivalent notion of belief (either I have a belief or I don’t have a belief) with the more permissive, probabilistic notion of credence (there is an entire spectrum of degrees of belief, not a simple dichotomy between belief and non-belief).²²

While belief plays a significant role in epistemological debates surrounding knowledge and justification, it also has many other philosophical debates in its own right. Notable debates include: What is the rational way to revise one's beliefs when presented with various sorts of evidence?; Is the content of our beliefs entirely determined by our mental states, or do the relevant facts have any bearing on our beliefs (example, if I believe that I am holding a glass of water, is the non-mental fact that water is H₂O part of the content of that belief)?; and Must it be possible for a belief to be expressible in language, or are there non-linguistic beliefs?

2.3.2 Truth

Truth is the property or state of being in accordance with facts or reality.²³ On most views, truth is the correspondence of language or thought to a mind-independent world. This is called the correspondence theory of truth. Among philosophers who think that it is possible to analyze the conditions necessary for knowledge, virtually all of them accept that truth is such a condition. There is much less agreement about the extent to which a knower must know *why* something is true in order to know. On such views, something being known implies that it is true. However, this should not be confused for the more contentious view that one must know that one knows in order to know.

¹⁹Edmund L. Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” *Analysis*, Vol. 23, (1963), 121–123.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹“The Analysis of Knowledge,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Retrieved October 27, 2021.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Rene Descartes* Vol. I. (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 171.

Epistemologists disagree about whether belief is the only truth-bearer. Other common suggestions for things that can bear the property of being true include propositions, sentences, thoughts, utterances, and judgments. Plato argues that belief is the most commonly invoked truth-bearer. Many of the debates regarding truth are at the crossroads of epistemology and logic. Some contemporary debates regarding truth include: How do we define truth? Is it even possible to give an informative definition of truth? What things are truth-bearers and are therefore capable of being true or false? Are truth and falsity bivalent, or are there other truth values? What are the criteria of truth that allow us to identify it and to distinguish it from falsity? What role does truth play in constituting knowledge? And is truth absolute, or is it merely relative to one's perspective?

2.3.3 Justification

As the term "justification" is used in epistemology, a belief is justified if one has good reason for holding it. Loosely speaking, justification is the *reason* for which someone holds a rationally admissible belief, on the assumption that it is a *good reason* for holding it. Sources of justification might include perceptual experience (the evidence of the senses), reason, and authoritative testimony, among others. Importantly however, a belief being justified does *not* guarantee that the belief is true, since a person could be justified in forming beliefs based on very convincing evidence that was nonetheless deceiving.

In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates considers a number of theories as to what knowledge is, first excluding merely true belief as an adequate account. For example, an ill person with no medical training, but with a generally optimistic attitude, might believe that he will recover from his illness quickly. Nevertheless, even if this belief turned out to be true, the patient would not have *known* that he would get well since his belief lacked justification. The last account that Plato considers is that knowledge is true belief with an account²⁴ that explains or defines it in some way. According to Edmund Gettier, the view that Plato is describing here is that knowledge is *justified true belief*. The truth of this view would entail that in order to know that a given proposition is true, one must not only believe the relevant true proposition, but must also have a good reason for doing so.²⁵ One implication of this would be that no one would gain knowledge just by believing something that happened to be true.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Edmund L. Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"

²⁶ Ibid.