

CHAPTER EIGHT

SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE AND JUSTIFICATION

8.1 Introductory Discourse

Beliefs arise in people for a wide variety of causes. Among them are psychological factors such as desires, emotional needs, prejudice, and biases of various kinds. Obviously, when beliefs originate in sources like these, they do not qualify as knowledge even if true. For true beliefs to count as knowledge, it is necessary that they originate in sources we have good reason to consider reliable. These are perception, introspection, memory, reason, and testimony. Let us briefly consider each of these.

8.2 Perception

Our perceptual faculties include at least our five senses: sight, touch, hearing, smelling, and tasting. We must distinguish between an experience that can be classified as *perceiving* that p (for example, seeing that there is tea in the cup and tasting that it is sweet), which entails that p is true, and a perceptual experience in which it seems to us as though p , but where p might be false. Let us refer to this latter kind of experience as *perceptual seemings*. The reason for making this distinction lies in the fact that perceptual experience is fallible. The world is not always as it appears to us in our perceptual experiences. We need, therefore, a way of referring to perceptual experiences in which p seems to be the case that allows for the possibility of p being false. That is the role assigned to perceptual seemings. So some perceptual seemings that p are cases of perceiving that p , others are not. When it looks to you as though there is a cup of tea on the table and in fact there is, the two states coincide. If, however, you hallucinate that there is a cup on the table, you have a perceptual seeming that p without perceiving that p .

One family of epistemological issues about perception arises when we concern ourselves with the psychological nature of the perceptual processes through which we acquire knowledge of external objects. According to *direct realism*, we can acquire such knowledge because we can directly perceive such objects. For example, when you see a tomato on the table, *what you perceive* is the tomato itself. According to *indirect realism*, we acquire knowledge of external objects by virtue of perceiving something else, namely appearances or sense-data. An indirect realist would say that, when you see and thus know that there is a tomato on the table, what you really see is not the tomato itself but a tomato-like sense-datum or some such entity.

Direct and indirect realists hold different views about the structure of perceptual knowledge. Indirect realists would say that we acquire perceptual knowledge of external objects by virtue of perceiving sense data that represent external objects. Sense data enjoy a special status: we know directly what they are like. Hence, indirect realists think that, when perceptual knowledge is foundational, it is knowledge of sense data and other mental states. Knowledge of external objects is indirect: derived from our knowledge of sense data. The basic idea is that we have indirect knowledge of the external world because we can have foundational knowledge of our

own mind. Direct realists, in contrast, say that perceptual experiences can give you direct, foundational knowledge of external objects.

We take our perceptual faculties to be reliable. But how can we know that they are reliable? For externalists, this might not be much of a challenge. If the use of reliable faculties is sufficient for knowledge, and if by using reliable faculties we acquire the belief that our faculties are reliable, then we come to know that our faculties are reliable. But even externalists might wonder how they can, via argument, *show* that our perceptual faculties are reliable. The problem is this: it would seem the only way of acquiring knowledge about the reliability of our perceptual faculties is through memory, through remembering whether they served us well in the past. But should I trust my memory, and should I think that the episodes of perceptual success that I seem to recall were in fact episodes of perceptual success? If I am entitled to answer these questions with “yes”, then I need to have, to begin with, reason to view my memory and my perceptual experiences as reliable. It would seem, therefore, that there is no non-circular way of arguing for the reliability of one’s perceptual faculties.¹¹⁴

8.3 Introspection

Introspection is the capacity to inspect the present contents of one’s own mind. Through introspection, one knows what mental states one is currently in: whether one is thirsty, tired, excited, or depressed. Compared with perception, introspection appears to have a special status. It is easy to see how a perceptual seeming can go wrong: what looks like a cup of tea on the table might be just be a clever hologram that is visually indistinguishable from an actual cup of tea. But can it introspectively seem to me that I have a headache when in fact I do not? It is not easy to see how it could be. Thus introspection is widely thought to enjoy a special kind of immunity to error. But what does this amount to?

First, it could be argued that, when it comes to introspection, there is no difference between appearance and reality; therefore, introspective seemings infallibly constitute their own success. Alternatively, one could view introspection as a source of certainty. Here the idea is that an introspective experience of p eliminates any possible reason for doubt as to whether p is true. Finally, one could attempt to explain the specialness of introspection by examining the way we respond to first-person reports: typically, a special authority is attributed a special authority to such reports. According to this approach, introspection is incorrigible: its deliverances cannot be corrected by any other source.

However, we construe the special kind of immunity to error that introspection enjoys, such immunity is not enjoyed by perception. Some foundationalists have therefore thought that the foundations of our empirical knowledge can be furnished by introspection of our own perceptual experiences, rather than perception of mind-independent things around us.

¹¹⁴ W.P. Alston, “Varieties of Privileged Access”, 7ff.

Is it really true, however, that, compared with perception, introspection is in some way special? Critics of foundationalism have argued that introspection is not infallible. Might one not confuse an unpleasant itch for a pain? Might I not think that the shape before me appears circular to me when in fact it appears slightly elliptical to me? If it is indeed possible for introspection to mislead, then it is not clear in what sense introspection can constitute its own success, provide certainty, or even incorrigibility. Yet it is also not easy to see either how, if one clearly and distinctly feels a throbbing headache, one could be mistaken about that. Introspection, then, turns out to be a mysterious faculty. On the one hand, it does not seem to be an infallible faculty; on the other hand, it is not easy to see how error is possible in many specific cases of introspection.

The definition of introspection as the capacity to know the present contents of one's own mind leaves open the question of how similar the different exercises of this capacity may be from one another. According to some epistemologists, when we exercise this capacity with respect to our sensations, we are doing something very different from what we do when we exercise this capacity with respect to our own conscious beliefs, intentions, or other rationally evaluable states of mind: our exercises of this capacity with respect to our own conscious, rationally evaluable states of mind is, they claim, partly *constitutive* of our being in those very states. In support of this claim, they point out that we sometimes address questions of the form "do you believe that *p*?" by considering whether it is true that *p*, and reporting our belief concerning *p* not by inspecting our mind, but rather by making up our mind.¹¹⁵

8.4 Memory

Memory is the capacity to retain knowledge acquired in the past. What one remembers, though, need not be a past event. It may be a present fact, such as one's telephone number, or a future event, such as the date of the next elections. Memory is, of course, fallible. Not every experience as of remembering that *p* is an instance of correctly remembering that *p*. We should distinguish, therefore, between remembering that *p* (which entails the truth of *p*) and *seeming* to remember that *p* (which does not entail the truth of *p*).

What makes memorial seemings a source of justification? Is it a necessary truth that, if one has a memorial seeming that *p*, one has thereby prima facie justification for *p*? Or is memory a source of justification only if, as coherentists might say, one has reason to think that one's memory is reliable? Or is memory a source of justification only if, as externalists would say, it is in fact reliable? Also, how can we respond to skepticism about knowledge of the past? Memorial seemings of the past do not guarantee that the past is what we take it to be. We think that we are older than twenty years, but it is very possible that we are not. This applies to our dispositions to have memorial seemings of a more distant past and items, such as apparent fossils that suggest a past going back millions of years. Our seeming to remember these things does not entail,

¹¹⁵ R. Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 94.

therefore, that it really is. Why, then, should we think that memory is a source of knowledge about the past?

8.5 Reason

Some beliefs are (thought to be) justified independently of experience. Justification of that kind is said to be *a priori*. A standard way of defining *a priori* justification is as follows:

8.5.1 A Priori Justification

S is justified *a priori* in believing that *p* if and only if *S*'s justification for believing that *p* does not depend on any experience.

When they are knowledgeably held, beliefs justified in this way are instances of *a priori* knowledge.

What exactly counts as experience? If by “experience” we mean just *perceptual* experiences, justification deriving from introspective or memorial experiences would count as *a priori*. For example, I could then know *a priori* that I am thirsty, or what I ate for breakfast this morning. While the term “*a priori*” is sometimes used in this way, the strict use of the term restricts *a priori* justification to justification derived *solely* from the use of reason. According to this usage, the word “experiences” in the definition above includes perceptual, introspective, and memorial experiences alike. On this narrower understanding, paragons of what I can know *a priori* are conceptual truths (such as “All bachelors are unmarried”), and truths of mathematics, geometry and logic.

Justification and knowledge that is not *a priori* is called “*a posteriori*” or “empirical”. For example, in the narrow sense of “*a priori*”, whether I am thirsty or not is something I know empirically (on the basis of introspective experiences), whereas I know *a priori* that 12 divided by 3 is 4.

Several important issues arise about *a priori* knowledge. First, does it exist at all? Skeptics about apriority deny its existence. They do not mean to say that we have no knowledge of mathematics, geometry, logic, and conceptual truths. Rather, what they claim is that all such knowledge is empirical.¹¹⁶

Second, if *a priori* justification is possible, exactly what does it involve? What *makes* a belief such as “All bachelors are unmarried” justified? Is it an unmediated grasp of the truth of this proposition? Or does it consist of grasping that the proposition is *necessarily* true? Or is it the purely intellectual state of “seeing” (with the “eye of reason”) or “intuiting” that this proposition

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

is true (or necessarily true)?¹¹⁷ Or is it, as externalists would suggest, the reliability of the cognitive process by which we come to recognize the truth of such a proposition?

Third, if *a priori* knowledge exists, what is its extent? *Empiricists* have argued that *a priori* knowledge is limited to the realm of the *analytic*, consisting of propositions true solely by virtue of our concepts, and so do not convey any information about the world. Propositions that convey genuine information about world are called *synthetic*. *A priori* knowledge of synthetic propositions, empiricists would say, is not possible. *Rationalists* deny this. They might appeal to a proposition such as “If a ball is green all over, then it does not have black spots” as an example of a proposition that is both synthetic and yet knowable *a priori*.¹¹⁸

8.6 Testimony

Testimony differs from the sources we considered above because it is not distinguished by having its own cognitive faculty. Rather, to acquire knowledge of *p* through testimony is to come to know that *p* on the basis of someone’s saying that *p*. “Saying that *p*” must be understood broadly, as including ordinary utterances in daily life, postings by bloggers on their blogs, articles by journalists, books and writings by authors, sermons from preachers, lectures from our teachers, delivery of information on television, radio, tapes, books, and other media. So, when you ask the person next to you what time it is, and she tells you, and you thereby come to know what time it is, that is an example of coming to know something on the basis of testimony.

The epistemological puzzle testimony raises is this: Why is testimony a source of knowledge? An externalist might say that testimony is a source of knowledge if, and because, it comes from a reliable source. But here, even more so than in the case of our faculties, internalists will not find that answer satisfactory. Suppose you hear someone saying “*p*”. Suppose, further, that person is in fact utterly reliable with regard to the question of whether *p* is the case or not. Finally, suppose you have no clue whatever as to that person’s reliability. Would it not be plausible to conclude that, since that person’s reliability is unknown to you, that person’s saying “*p*” does not put you in a position to know that *p*? But if the reliability of a testimonial source is not sufficient for making it a source of knowledge, what else is needed?

Thomas Reid suggested that, by our very nature, we accept testimonial sources as reliable and tend to attribute credibility to them unless we encounter special contrary reasons.¹¹⁹ But that is merely a statement of the attitude we in fact take toward testimony. What is it that makes that attitude reasonable? It could be argued that, in one’s own personal experiences with testimonial sources, one has accumulated a long track record that can be taken as a sign of reliability.

¹¹⁷ J. Bengson, “The Intellectual Given”, *Mind*, 124(495), (2015), 707.

¹¹⁸ B. Ichikawa, and Benjamin Jarvis, “Thought-Experiment Intuitions and Truth in Fiction”, *Philosophical Studies*, 142(2), (2009), 221.

¹¹⁹ Derek R. Brookes (ed.), *Thomas Reids’ An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

However, when we think of the sheer breadth of the knowledge we derive from testimony, one wonders whether one's personal experiences constitute an evidence base rich enough to justify the attribution of reliability to the totality of the testimonial sources one tends to trust.¹²⁰ An alternative to the track record approach would be to declare it a necessary truth that trust in testimonial sources is at least prima facie justified. While this view has been prominently defended, it requires an explanation of what makes such trust necessarily prima facie justified. Such explanations have proven to be controversial.¹²¹

¹²⁰ E. Fricker, "Against Gullibility", in *Knowing from Words: Western and Indian Philosophical Analysis of Understanding and Testimony*, Bimal Krishna Matilal and Arindam Chakrabarti (eds.), (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1994), 126–127; M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹²¹ Cf. J. Lackey, *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 119.