

Introduction to Epistemology

The *theory of knowledge*, or, as it is sometimes called, *epistemology*, is a branch of philosophy which investigates the nature, scope, and quality of human knowledge. What is knowledge? How extensive is it? How good is it? Just as metaphysics tries to discover what is real and how reality differs from appearance, so the theory of knowledge tries to discover what knowledge is and how it differs from mere opinion. That is, epistemology tries to establish normative criteria for what is to count as knowledge. Epistemology is obviously an important topic, since knowledge is so important in human life. Human beings are capable of holding and expressing a wide range of opinions on a variety of topics. But although we may be said to possess genuine knowledge in some of these cases, there are many others in which we do *not* know, but only *think* we know. And the most obvious difference between the two clearly indicates why knowledge is so important.

to mere opinion. The very word *knowledge* has an honorific quality, connoting a positive value. Knowledge is, in short, a much more reliable guide to action than mere belief or opinion.

Now we see the significance of the philosopher's question, "What is the difference between knowledge and mere opinion?" Since knowledge is so important and desirable in human affairs, it would be very good if we had a reliable way of picking it out from the larger class of beliefs.

This is going to be a difficult thing to do, however, as we will see. Let us examine the problem to see what solving it involves. At first glance it seems fair to say that although everything we know is also believed, not everything we believe is known. Why, what is the difference?

As we saw in Part 2 in discussing the traditional analysis of knowledge in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, it seems intuitively clear that where we believe something which we do not know, that belief could be false, whereas when we truly know something it could not be false. Here we see the intimate connection between problems of knowledge and considerations of truth and falsity. Can a person believe something which is false? Sure. But can a person *know* something that is false? Here we come back to the honorific or complimentary character of the word *knowledge*. When you say that someone knows something, you are paying that person a compliment, that what the person believes is true. But what if we later discover that what we said this person knew turned out to be false after all? We would retract our claim that we were dealing with knowledge and substitute the more evaluatively neutral claim that the person merely believed or thought it was true.

But now we can begin to see why the theory of knowledge is so difficult. To discover the difference between knowledge and belief we must differentiate between those beliefs which are true and those which might not be. But how can we do that? Everything I believe I believe to be true. Otherwise I would not believe it! To believe something implies that the person holds the belief to be true. In my own case it would seem very difficult indeed to sort my true from my false (or possibly false) beliefs. Of course we can draw the distinction quite easily in judging what other people think. It is easy for me to say that my friend believes things which are not true. But if I turn that around now and ask whether I know or merely believe that my friend's opinion is not true, I am right back where I started. I can distinguish knowledge from belief in others, but surprisingly not in my own case. We will return to the problem of truth in a moment. But first let us look at some other seemingly obvious differences between knowledge and belief which might serve as a criterion for distinguishing them.

Knowledge, Opinion, and Belief

When you know something you not only have an opinion, but that opinion is true; that is, it coincides with reality. When you merely believe something but do not know it, then it is possible that what you believe is not true but only exists in your mind. This means that when we think something is the case but do not know it we are more liable to be mistaken. And herein lies the practical importance of knowledge. The whole point of a great deal of our thinking is to correctly adjust our beliefs to the way things actually are in the world. It is essential to our very survival that we be able to do so at least most of the time. Apart from daydreaming, storytelling, and the like, the function of human thinking is to align thought and behavior with reality. For these reasons it is clear why knowledge is preferable

Knowledge and Certainty

Part of the complimentary flavor of the word *knowledge* lies in the fact that those who know something have a right to a certain confidence in their belief as a true and reliable guide to action. Knowledge implies being sure, being certain. Would you say you knew something if you were not sure about it? "I know he will be here, but I am not sure." This sounds odd. On the other hand, there is no problem saying you believe something but are

not sure. "I think so, but I'm not sure." Might not this provide us with the criterion we are seeking? Descartes thought so, making this the cornerstone of his entire philosophy. But there are problems with this, too. If I merely believe something I will have some hesitancy, some doubt about it, and if I claim to know something I will feel much more certain and confident about it. But will this criterion always and necessarily work? Do people always know what they feel confident about? No. People we judge to be fanatics are precisely those we feel have maximum feelings of certitude and minimum information. I can, of course, always tell how certain I feel about a given opinion, but that will do me little good in my theory of knowledge unless that feeling of certainty is firmly linked with genuine knowledge of the truth, which, unfortunately, is not the case. We shall return to the relationship of knowledge and certainty in a moment, but first let us examine one final possible criterion for distinguishing knowledge from belief.

Part of our greater confidence in the truth of what we claim to know arises from the fact that we have better *reasons* for believing our information to be true. We examined this position briefly in the chapter on reasoning. Sometimes we deny that a person knows something even though it turns out to be true, simply because the person's reasons for believing it were not good enough. In other words, part of our compliment in saying that someone knows something is that the person has good grounds for confidence in its truth. And this criterion, though perhaps not perfect, as we shall see, does provide a better practical guide than either truth or certainty. The other criteria do not really tell us what to do; this one does. The human dilemma as regards knowledge is that we cannot easily distinguish in our own case what is true from what we merely think is true, and we cannot place too much confidence simply in our own feelings of certainty. But what we *can* do is to get ourselves into the best possible position to know—weighing all the evidence, examining all the arguments, pro and con. The result of this is not necessarily or absolutely the truth, but what is most probable and therefore the likeliest to be true. And this, short of our becoming gods, may be all that humans are capable of.

Epistemology and Psychology

Perhaps the goals and concerns of epistemology will be clearer if we contrast them with the goals and concerns of psychology. Both epistemology and psychology are concerned with human consciousness, and it might at first appear that epistemology is only trying to do what psychology is in a position to do better. But there is a fundamental difference between the two approaches. Psychology is an attempt to *describe* the way the human mind actually operates; epistemology seeks to establish normative criteria for how we *ought* to think. In its more experimental mode, psychology centers its attention on the physiological aspects of the knowing process on the brain, stimulus-response mechanisms, the nervous system, and so forth. As a descriptive enterprise, it is not the purpose of psychology to delve into the intricacies of separating opinion from knowledge and belief from opinion. Whereas the epistemologist is concerned with standards of acceptability in terms of which to judge beliefs, the psychologist is mainly interested in understanding the *how* of human thinking.

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In short, epistemology is concerned with discovering a sure guide to truth. But what *is* truth? This is an old question, the question Pilate asked Jesus. When we look at the kinds of answers given by philosophers, they all gravitate toward three principal theories: (1) the correspondence theory of truth, (2) the coherence theory, and (3) the pragmatic test of truth. Generally speaking, we can say that most empiricists accept a correspondence theory of truth and most rationalists accept a coherence theory. The difference between them is basically this: The correspondence theory holds that our thoughts are true if they *correspond* to reality. This theory works best if you hold to a theory of knowledge (such as the British empiricists did) that thoughts and ideas are copies of physical objects mediated by the senses. The correspondence theory works pretty well as long as you are dealing with physical objects, less well when dealing with nonphysical objects—moods, emotions, hopes, ambitions, fears, moral truths, arithmetic, and so on. The coherence theory, in contrast to the correspondence theory, holds that we are entitled to accept the truth of a statement if it is *coherent* with our other accepted items of belief and knowledge. For example, astronomers believed in the existence of the planet Pluto before they were able to see it with telescopes; they predicted its existence from the behavior of the other planets whose orbits were skewed as they would be if there existed a ninth planet. Moreover; there was nothing about believing in the existence of another planet that in any way threatened existing views about the solar system. Adding another planet is coherent with our established beliefs, and it causes the minimum of alteration in these beliefs.

Suppose, though, we do not have empirical evidence for the truth of a new claim, but it is coherent with our other established beliefs. How do we determine whether to accept or reject it? Here the *pragmatic test* is suggested by some philosophers as a way of judging hypotheses proposed to us for acceptance. If given two hypotheses, and no other way of determining the truth or falsity of them, ask yourself what the practical difference would be if you accepted one and rejected the other. If you have no other basis on which to decide, make your choice on the basis of this practical difference. If there is no practical difference between them, then no matter of truth is really at stake. A difference that makes no difference is really no difference at all.

Philosophers who argue for each of these views of truth are usually pretty onesided in their defense of their view. A defender of a correspondence theory of truth will want you to believe that all matters of truth must be so decided. The defender of a coherence theory will similarly try to convince you that the coherence test is the only satisfactory way of resolving doubt. In practice, we probably use all three methods of judging the truth of claims presented to us. We accept some claims because there is a correspondence with empirical data. Others we adopt because they fit in well with our other well-established views. Still other matters must be decided by appealing to the practical difference resulting from our acceptance or rejection of the truth claim or item presented to us for belief.

Epistemology is also important in philosophy because it serves as a bridge to other philosophical issues. If we are concerned with knowing reality, we must also take up the question of what is real (metaphysics). A consideration of how we should judge statements as to their truth value leads us directly into a consideration of principles of reasoning (logic). And when we attempt to relate matters of belief and knowledge to choices of action, we are led immediately into a discussion of principles that should guide our actions (ethics).

Sources of Knowledge

Having looked at the area of epistemology in general, we shall now examine in detail one very important problem in epistemology, the source of our knowledge. Is knowledge based entirely on reason, or must it be grounded in direct sense experience of the world, or some combination of the two? In the readings we will look at an example of the first (rationalism), an example of the second (empiricism), and one attempt to reconcile or combine the two.

Perhaps the best way to approach our question is to return to the discussion in the previous paragraphs about certainty. The ideal kind of knowledge we are all after is knowledge that tells us something about the real world and that is absolutely certain. But is such ideal knowledge possible? Empirical knowledge seems, in principle, to fall short of this ideal. All of our claims to know something about the objective physical world are liable to error, no matter how careful we are. It is always possible to be mistaken (as we shall see from the Descartes reading). But what *can* we know with complete certainty? Perhaps only that I exist, and some mathematical, logical, self-evident truths. Can we build the whole of knowledge on this meager basis? At first some philosophers in the modern period, such as Descartes, thought we could. But it finally dawned on other philosophers, such as Hume, that this was an impossible dream. The cost of saying something about the real world is to be liable to error. And the price of absolute certainty is not to say anything about the real world. Let us look at this. How is error possible? Error enters, we may say, in the gap between thought and reality, between what we *think* things are like and what they really are. The only way to avoid the gap *completely* is not to make claims about the world at all.

But what sort of knowledge is it that makes no claim at all about the world? Historically, there have been two proposals, one that appealed to the *rationalists* and one that became the foundation for the *empiricists* (though the roots of both, as we shall see, are to be found in the rationalist, Descartes). In the first sort of case, imagine a weather reporter who becomes so frustrated at being mistaken night after night, saying it will snow when it does not and that it will not snow when it does, that in desperation the reporter finally announces that "tomorrow either it will snow or it will not." This statement avoids all possibility of being proved wrong, but what have we learned about the weather? Nothing. This is an example of a statement which is "analytically" true, that is, true by definition. Another example is, "All bachelors are unmarried." This statement is analytically true simply because "unmarried" is part of the definition of "bachelor" (a bachelor is "an unmarried man"). By tracing out the logical implications embedded in concepts like this, elaborate systems of logic and mathematics can be constructed, and on this model rationalist philosophers, such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz, hoped to erect the structure of knowledge on a solid and secure foundation of complete certainty.

The other kind of certainty, which appealed to empiricist philosophers, but which is also purchased at the price of not saying anything about the external world, consists of purely introspective claims about how things appear to us. If I say that I see a pool of water in the road ahead, I may be proved wrong (if it turns out to be a mirage, for example), but if I say that it *looks* like a pool of water, there is nothing that can prove me

wrong—whatever it is, it does *look* to me like a pool of water. And it was on this basis that the empiricists proposed to erect the foundations of all knowledge.

Both the empiricist account and the rationalist account are based on certainty and each avoids error by restricting itself to a special kind of knowledge which does not claim any sort of correspondence to an external reality—the rationalists by limiting claims to the relation of words to ideas, and the empiricists by restricting themselves to claims about the quality of internal sensations. Since they do not *claim* any correspondence with an external reality, there is no possibility of a *failed* correspondence, and hence no possibility of error. Nor is there, however, any possibility of knowledge of informational content. The choice seems to be as follows: If you want to say something about the world, you will have to give up the quest for absolute certainty, and if you want complete certainty, you must give up the idea of talking about the world. In either case, the long-sought goal of certain knowledge about the actual world seems to be an illusion.

Before turning to selections from the philosophers themselves, a final word about a commitment shared by almost all philosophers concerned with epistemology: Philosophers are generally a breed of folks who think that knowledge is possible. At various points in the history of philosophy, persons have appeared who argued that knowledge is not possible. In ancient Greece, Gorgias, a contemporary of Plato, claimed that there is no such thing as reality and if there were we could never have knowledge of it, and even if we could know about it we could not communicate this knowledge! This is perhaps the most extreme form of *skepticism*—*denial* of the possibility of knowledge—in the history of philosophy. Plato rejected skepticism, as have most of the other principal figures in the history of philosophy, for skepticism is not only a philosophical dead end, it is also internally inconsistent. Skepticism is a dead end for the reason that, if we accept skeptical conclusions, there is no knowledge and therefore no epistemology. But a more serious objection to skepticism is that it contradicts itself. If you say, à la Gorgias, that there is no knowledge, do you *know* this to be true? How can you *know* that you cannot *know*? See the problem? A similar difficulty confronts the person who says, "There is no truth." (Is *that* statement true?) If your epistemological reasoning leads you to skepticism, you can either assume that you made a mistake somewhere in your reasoning and start all over again (which is what Descartes did) or you can simply accept your skeptical conclusions, give up philosophy, and go about your other business (which is what Hume did).

We will examine selections from the writings of both these philosophers, but first we will examine a much older theory of knowledge—that of Plato.

Questions for Discussion

1. If you had to characterize your own epistemological views, would you say you accept a correspondence, coherence, or pragmatic theory? Why?
2. In your own words, characterize the difference between *knowledge*, *belief*, and *opinion*.
3. From your own experience, give an example of how your thinking about a particular issue moved from error to truth. What considerations supported this change? Can you formulate them precisely?
4. What is appealing about giving the senses a primary role in knowledge? What are the limitations of this approach?
5. What is appealing about giving reason a primary role in knowledge? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?

