

# **PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE**

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AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

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## **CHAPTER 2 - KNOWLEDGE**

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# 2 KNOWLEDGE

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## 2.1 Got Knowledge?

What is knowledge? Who has it and how did they get it? What do you know and how do you know it? These questions and the problems that arise in answering them have been central concerns of philosophers. The traditional philosophical study of knowledge is epistemology.

Epistemology is one of the major branches of philosophy. It concerns the forms, nature, and preconditions of knowledge. One of the traditional concerns has been the problem of skepticism: the possibility that we know nothing at all. Other problems concern supplying an analysis of the concept of knowledge: is knowledge the same as justified true belief? What more or less could it be? Before describing how these problems have been tackled we briefly

describe the main kinds of knowledge.

## 2.2. Kinds of Knowledge

### A. THE SENSES OF 'KNOW'

There are several kinds of knowledge, and they may be classified in terms of the different senses of the word 'know'. Here we discuss three:

- Propositional knowledge (knowing that)
- Procedural knowledge (knowing how)
- Acquaintance knowledge (knowing who)

The first and of primary interest to philosophers is propositional knowledge—the knowledge you have when you know *that* something is the case. Examples of ascriptions of propositional knowledge include

- Mary knows that grass is green
- Shaquille knows that  $420 + 80 = 500$
- Xavier knows that Wolverine is angry again

We will return to the topic of propositional knowledge because most of our discussion of epistemology in the following sections concerns it.

Moving to the next item on our list we have procedural knowledge, the knowledge had in knowing *how* to do something. Examples of ascriptions of procedural knowledge include

- Mary knows how to mow the lawn
- Shaquille knows how to do arithmetic
- Xavier knows how to calm Wolverine down

One point of interest is the ways in which procedural and propositional knowledge relate, or fail to. For instance, knowing how to ride a bike does not seem to entail having any *particular* bit of propositional knowledge. Similarly, a head full of propositional knowledge like “the hands go here, the pedals should be pumped in this fashion” seems insufficient to bestow know-how. You could know all of that stuff without thereby knowing how to ride a bike.

Last on our list is acquaintance knowledge. Examples of ascriptions of acquaintance knowledge include

- Mary knows Shaquille
- Shaquille knows New York City
- Xavier knows Wolverine

Our first and third examples concern acquaintance with a person, the second, acquaintance with a geographic locale. Note the differences between acquaintance knowledge and other kinds. For instance, one may know innumerable bits a propositional knowledge about some person, but this will be

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insufficient to render it correct to say that they *know* the person: it is necessary that they meet them to be acquainted with them.

As already mentioned, propositional knowledge has been of primary interest to those studying knowledge. From here on out, unless otherwise noted, when we discuss knowledge we are discussing propositional knowledge

### B. A PRIORI AND A POSTERIORI KNOWLEDGE

Is it raining where you are right now? How would you know? Perhaps you are near a window and need only look outside. Upon looking out the window you come to have knowledge of the weather, you come to know whether it is raining. Suppose, for the sake of example, it is raining right now, and you come to know that it is raining right now. This bit of knowledge that you have acquired is a bit of *a posteriori* knowledge: you knew the truth of the proposition in question (the proposition that it is raining) only *after* (thus *posterior* to, and thus the Latin “*a posteriori*”) having some relevant perceptual experience, in this case, the experience of looking out the window. Consider now a different proposition: “either it is raining or it is not”. This is obviously true and you need not look out the window to verify it. The truth of “either it is raining or it is not” can be known by reason alone and thus can be known *before* (thus prior to, and thus the Latin “*a priori*”) having the experience of looking out the window. Propositions of the form “either P or not P” as in “either it is raining or it is not raining” and “Either elephants are invertebrates or they are not invertebrates” are logical truths. They are knowable *a priori* because their logical form determines their truth. Another alleged class of *a priori* knowledge is constituted by the so-called analytic truths, like “all bachelors are unmarried males”. These are propositions that are true in virtue of the meanings of the terms employed: any one who knows the meaning of “bachelor”, “unmarried”, “male”, etc. thereby knows *a priori* that all bachelors are unmarried males. Yet another alleged class of *a priori* knowledge is constituted by mathematical truths such as “ $2+2=4$ ” and “the interior angle sum of any triangle on the Euclidian plane is  $180^\circ$ ”. Once you know the meaning of the relevant terms—“two”, “plus” and “equals” etc.—mathematical truths are knowable by reason alone. The ultimate justification of mathematical statements is not based on observation. If we put 2 rabbits together with another 2 rabbits and, a few weeks later discovered that we now had 16 rabbits, this would not make us believe that  $2+2=16$ . Instead we would believe that one or more of the male rabbits got one or more of the female rabbits pregnant.

The knowledge generated by the pursuit of the natural sciences is a *posteriori* knowledge, otherwise known as empirical knowledge. Empirical knowledge is acquired ultimately through the involvement of sensory experience. In science one uses vision and other senses to make careful observations of natural phenomena. The methods of experimentation so crucial

to the empirical sciences are ultimately ways to regulate the sensory experiences one has and the perceptual beliefs one forms while interacting with the world. In an experiment, unlike pure observation, the investigator manipulates conditions and then observes the results.

### 2.3 What is Knowledge?

Philosophers have traditionally analyzed the concept of knowledge as being *justified true belief*. Thus, on this traditional tripartite analysis, for something to count as a bit of knowledge it is necessary and sufficient that it be a belief, that it be justified, and that it be true. After a bit of reflection, the classical analysis may start to seem obvious to you. Consider Mary. She believes that she has \$10 in her pocket, but unfortunately, the money fell out of her pocket about a half an hour ago. So she doesn't *know* that she has \$10, no matter how strongly she believes it, since her belief is false. Consider Larry. He is asked to guess how much money Mary has in her pocket. Suppose that for no reason whatsoever, just by random chance, he forms the belief that she has no money in her pocket. He never met Mary, he never looked in her pocket, but somehow he just happens to have this belief, and it just happens to be a true belief. This true belief without justification is not knowledge: Larry may have guessed correctly the contents of Mary's pocket but he doesn't really *know* what is in there.

Or does he? Is justification necessary for knowledge? Consider the chicken sexers. Chicken sexers are people who sort baby chicks into the males and the females. How they do this, however, is something that they cannot explain: there is no list of easily identifiable cues that they can recite, no explicit criteria that they employ. Nonetheless, for any male or female chick, the chicken sexer may come to know that the chick is, say, female. Do chicken sexers have knowledge without justification? If having a justification for a belief entails being able to say how one came to have that belief, then it seems the chicken sexers have no justification for their beliefs about the sexes for chickens. However, as we will discuss in section 2.5, there is an alternate conception of justification whereby perhaps chicken sexers do have justification for their beliefs. On a *reliabilist* conception of justification, whereby a belief is justified if it is the product of processes that reliably produce true beliefs, it may turn out that chicken sexers have justification for their beliefs.

The above remarks concern the necessity of justification, truth and belief for knowledge. We turn now to briefly consider the question of whether these necessary conditions are sufficient. In 1963, Edmund Gettier drew attention to a class of seeming counterexamples to the sufficiency of justified true belief for knowledge. For one such example, consider the following. You put a ten-dollar bill in your pocket and leave your home. As you walk down the street, unbeknownst to you, the bill falls out of your pocket. Later, while on the subway, a crazy person, gently and without your noticing, slips a ten-dollar bill

into your pocket. You have justification for believing that there is a ten dollar bill in your pocket: you remember putting one there in the morning. And due to happy though odd circumstances, your justified belief just happens to be true. But, so the story goes, this justified true belief fails to be knowledge: you don't really *know* that there is a ten-dollar bill in your pocket.

Another Gettier-style example is based on a true story involving friends of the author. Whit Schonbein telephoned Tad Zawidzki. Tad said that he couldn't talk right at that moment, but would call Whit back in a few minutes. A few minutes went by and Whit's phone rang. Whit picked up the phone and said "hi Tad", thus completely surprising the person on the other line who was not Tad Zawidzki, but an old friend of Whit's—also named Tad—who hadn't spoken to Whit in years. When the phone rang, Whit formed the justified true belief that someone named Tad was on the other end of the line, but was this knowledge? Many philosophers would say "no": these sorts of situations present genuine counterexamples to the tripartite analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. What else, then, needs to be done to define knowledge? Is knowledge justified true belief plus some fourth element? Or perhaps we need different account of justification? This latter option will be discussed in section 2.5 on theories of justification.

## 2.4 Skeptical Challenges

Skepticism is the view that we lack knowledge. The global skeptic denies the existence of any knowledge. Local skeptics deny knowledge about some restricted domain; for instance, one might deny that we can have knowledge of states of affairs external to our minds. Another local skeptic might deny that we can know anything about supernatural entities and thus is agnostic about the existence of God.

The major kinds of arguments for skeptical conclusions may be classified in terms of the necessary conditions for knowledge: justification, truth, and belief. Berkeley was a skeptic about mind-independent objects because, he argued, we could not even coherently believe in their existence. He argued that any attempt to do so would automatically make them mind-dependent. According to Berkeley's famous Master Argument for idealism, the attempt to imagine an object existing while no minds exist is self-refuting, because the act of imagining requires the existence of a mind. Another famous argument for skepticism is the Pessimistic Induction against empirical knowledge. This argument attacks the claims to truth of so-called empirical knowledge. The inductive premises of the argument enumerate the times that claims to empirical knowledge have turned out false. Scientists used to think that the world was flat, and it turned out they were wrong. Scientists used to think that combustion was the rapid release of phlogiston and it turned out they were wrong. And so on.

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Therefore, everything scientists think will turn out to be wrong. Whether this is a good argument or not, you can't deny that it's pessimistic!

A skeptical argument that focuses on justification is exemplified in perhaps the most influential form of skepticism: Cartesian Skepticism. The gist of Cartesian-style skeptical arguments is that some empirical proposition (e.g. that there are trees) cannot be known because we might be deceived (e.g. we might be brains in vats hallucinating that there are trees). These arguments attack our justification for believing some empirical proposition on grounds of possible deception.

Right now you may believe that you are wearing shoes. But do you really *know* that you are wearing shoes? If you do, then you have a bit of empirical knowledge about the external world. Your knowledge would be based on your perceptual experience: you look down at your feet and see that you have shoes on and this provides you with the justified true belief that you have shoes on. However, Descartes would point out that your senses cannot be trusted since you have been deceived by them in the past. The stick has looked bent when it is really straight, and in dreams it may seem that there is an elephant in your room and that he is pink. For all you know then, even though your senses are telling you that you have shoes upon your feet, they may be deceiving you. If, for all you know, your senses are deceiving you, then you don't really know whether you have shoes. Another term for this kind of skepticism is error skepticism: according to this style of skepticism, if a putative source of knowledge, like perception, has ever been in error, then it can never deliver knowledge because it can never supply justification to the associated beliefs (even if those beliefs just happen to be true). These Cartesian thoughts about knowledge have exerted a powerful force on those who have contemplated them, and many thus despair that we may never actually have empirical knowledge.

### 2.5 Theories of Justification

One of the main areas of contemporary epistemological research involves theories of justification. Here we briefly describe three: foundationalism, coherentism, and reliabilism.

#### A. Foundationalism

You may believe that grass is green. What is your justification for this belief? You have seen grass and it looks green and you believe that things are the way they seem. The justification of the first belief is the second belief. But what is your justification for the second belief? Is it yet a third belief? Perhaps you have

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one. And perhaps we can ask for the justification of *that* belief. Can this game continue indefinitely, like the annoying child's game of repeatedly asking "why"? Or must instead the buck stop somewhere with self-evident and self-justified beliefs in need of no further justification? According to foundationalism the buck does stop somewhere.

According to foundationalism beliefs are justified by being either self-justifying or logically derived from other justified beliefs. The self-justifying beliefs form the foundation upon which all other beliefs are justified. The process of showing that a belief is justified involves showing that the belief may be logically derived from other beliefs that are themselves justified. This process may continue until a belief or set of beliefs is reached that is in need of no further justification in virtue of being self justified or, as some philosophers say, given.

Foundationalism runs into problems. What are the self-justifying beliefs? And are there enough of them? Descartes offered 'I think, I exist' as self evident, but is it? And even if it is, does it serve to justify much of anything, yet alone claims to empirical knowledge? Even Descartes recognized that proving his existence (in his 'I think therefore I am') was an insufficient ground for claims to empirical knowledge, thus he attempted to prove further that God existed and that God would not let sensory experience be systematically deceptive. Few philosophers find this solution satisfactory.

### **B. Coherentism**

According to coherentism, no beliefs in a person's belief set count as foundational beliefs. Instead it is sufficient for the justification of a belief that it be the member of a coherent set of your beliefs, that is, a logically consistent set of beliefs. But a big question that arises is how many of your beliefs must be in this set? If you are epistemically modest, then you will admit the probability that at least one of the things that you believe contradicts at least one of the other things that you believe. You are not sure which of your beliefs are inconsistent with the rest, but it is likely that at least a few of them are. But, does this thereby render all of your beliefs unjustified? Intuitively it does not: the mere fact that not all of your beliefs are consistent with every other does not seem to entail that none of them are justified. Consider an example. Suppose that Xavier believes that Wolverine ate the last cookie in the cookie jar. Suppose later that Xavier comes to hold the contradictory belief that Rogue ate the last cookie, thus Xavier's most recent belief does not cohere with all of the other beliefs in his belief set. It contradicts at least one of them. Thus the entirety of Xavier's beliefs form an inconsistent belief set. But consider some belief of Xavier's seemingly unrelated to questions of cookies, for instance, his belief that the moon is closer to the Earth than the sun. He may be entirely justified in this belief regardless of holding contradictory beliefs about the cookies and the

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cookie jar. Thus coherentism should not make the justifying belief set the totality of a person's beliefs, but some relevant subset. But what is the relevant subset?

A different problem for coherentism is the way it seems to make justification totally float free of truth. A completely delusional person may have a coherent belief set: he believes that he is Napoleon, that his bed is a horse, that his broom closet is a castle, and so on. Every one of his beliefs may be false even though they form a consistent set. How, then, can mere coherence form a justificatory grounding for genuine empirical knowledge? Genuine empirical knowledge, if there is such a thing, is about the external world: it reaches out beyond our belief set to make contact with the truth of the matter.

### C. Reliabilism

Reliabilism is a theory of justification that attempts to make contact with truth in a way that coherentism cannot. Reliabilism also offers to solve the problems raised earlier in discussion of the chicken sexers and the Gettier counterexamples to the tripartite analysis.

Foundationalism and coherentism are both internalist theories since they make factors relevant to the justification of a belief internal to the belief set of the believer. Reliabilism is in contrast an externalist theory. The justifying factors relate a belief to things external to the believer.

According to reliabilism, a belief is justified if it is the product of a belief forming process that reliably produces true beliefs. Thus, the chicken sexers who know the sex of a chicken without being able to say how they know are justified in their beliefs because their beliefs result from a process that is reliable in forming true beliefs about the sex of chicks. Some versions of reliabilism have built in to the theory that there be appropriate causal relations between the knower and the thing known. Thus there has to be an appropriate causal chain between the truth maker and the belief for the belief to count as justified. With this minimal sketch of reliabilism in place we can see how it makes contact with the problems raised by the Gettier counterexamples. In the story about Whit and the two Tads, the phone rang, causing Whit to believe that a person named Tad was calling, but this belief was about Tad Zawidzki, and Whit's belief was caused by the other Tad, thus, if a certain version of reliabilism is correct, it turns out that the Gettier examples are not cases of *justified* belief. This is because the normal chains of causation between the belief and the truth makers have been severed, the beliefs do not count as justified.

## 2.6 Knowledge Glossary

**belief** – The state of mind of holding a proposition to be true. For example, if Jones believes that grass is green, then Jones is in the state of mind of holding to be true the proposition that grass is green.

**declarative sentence** – a sentence that can be either true or false

**epistemology** - A major branch of philosophy that concerns the forms, nature, and preconditions of knowledge.

**justification** – The reason, evidence, warrant, or support for a belief.

**pessimistic induction** – an argument for skepticism about scientific knowledge that says since all scientific theories have been proven false so far, all scientific theories will be false.

**proposition** - the content of a declarative sentence. The English sentence “Snow is white” and the French sentence “Neige est blanc” both express the same proposition.

**skepticism** – The view that there is no knowledge. Global skepticism is the view that there is absolutely no knowledge at all. Local skepticism is the view that there are certain kinds of things that cannot be known, while allowing that there may be some knowledge about other things. Agnosticism—the belief that it cannot be known whether or not God exists—is a kind of local skepticism.

**sentence** – A collection of words expressing a complete thought. The three main kinds of sentences are imperatives (commands), interrogatives (questions), and declaratives (statements).

**truth** - the correspondence between a representation with propositional content and a fact. The sentence "Snow is white" is true because it corresponds to the fact that snow is white. "Snow is purple" is false because there is no fact that it corresponds to--it is not a fact that snow is purple.