

Theory of Knowledge

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Epistemology, the study of the theory of knowledge, is among the most important areas of philosophy. The questions that it addresses include the following:

What is knowledge?

The first problem encountered in epistemology is that of defining knowledge. Much of the time, philosophers use the tripartite theory of knowledge, which analyses knowledge as justified true belief, as a working model. Rival analyses of knowledge have been proposed, but there is as yet no consensus on what knowledge is. This fundamental question of epistemology remains unsolved.

Though philosophers are unable to provide a generally accepted analysis of knowledge, we all understand roughly what we are talking about when we use words such as “knowledge”. Thankfully, this means that it is possible to get on with epistemology, leaving unsolved the fundamental question as to what knowledge is.

From where do we get our knowledge?

A second important issue in epistemology concerns the ultimate source of our knowledge. There are two traditions: empiricism, which holds that our knowledge is primarily based in experience, and rationalism, which holds that our knowledge is primarily based in reason. Although the modern scientific worldview borrows heavily from empiricism, there are reasons for thinking that a synthesis of the two traditions is more plausible than either of them individually.

How are our beliefs justified?

There are better and worse ways to form beliefs. In general terms, it is important to consider evidence when deciding what to believe, because by doing so we are more likely to form beliefs that are true. Precisely how this should work, when we are justified in believing something and when we are not, is another topic in the theory of knowledge. The three most prominent theories of epistemic justification are foundationalism, coherentism, and reliabilism.

How do we perceive the world around us?

Much of our knowledge, it seems, does come to us through our senses, through perception. Perception, though, is a complex process. The way that we experience the world may be determined in part by the world, but it is also determined in part by us. We do not passively receive information through our senses; arguably, we contribute just as much to our experiences as do the objects that they are experiences of. How we are to understand the process of perception, and how this should effect our understanding of the world that we inhabit, is therefore vital for epistemology.

Do we know anything at all?

The area of epistemology that has captured most imaginations is philosophical scepticism. Alongside the questions of what knowledge is and how we come to acquire it is the question whether we do in fact know anything at all. There is a long philosophical tradition that says that we do not, and the arguments in support of this position, though resisted by most, are remarkably difficult to refute. The most persistent problem in the theory of knowledge is not what knowledge is or what it comes from, but whether there is any such thing at all.

Types of Knowledge

Philosophers typically divide knowledge into three categories: personal, procedural, and propositional. It is the last of these, propositional knowledge, that primarily concerns philosophers. However, understanding the connections between the three types of knowledge can be helpful in clearly understanding what is and what is not being analysed by the various theories of knowledge.

Personal Knowledge

The first kind of knowledge is personal knowledge, or knowledge by acquaintance. This is the kind of knowledge that we are claiming to have when we say things like “I know Mozart’s music.”

Procedural Knowledge

The second kind of knowledge is procedural knowledge, or knowledge how to do something. People who claim to know how to juggle, or how to drive, are not simply claiming that they understand the theory involved in those activities. Rather, they are claiming that actually possess the skills involved, that they are able to do these things.

Propositional Knowledge

The third kind of knowledge, the kind that philosophers care about most, is propositional knowledge, or knowledge of facts. When we say things like “I know that the internal angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees” or “I know that it was you that ate my sandwich”, we are claiming to have propositional knowledge.

Personal Knowledge

The first type of knowledge is personal knowledge, or knowledge by acquaintance. Knowledge in this sense is to do with being familiar with something: in order to know Amy, one must have met her; in order to know fear, one must have experienced it. In each of these cases, the word “know” is being used to refer to knowledge by acquaintance.

Personal knowledge does, arguably, involve possessing at least some propositional knowledge. If I have met Amy, but can’t remember a single thing about her, then I

probably wouldn't claim to know her. In fact, knowing a person (in the sense required for knowledge by acquaintance) does seem to involve knowing a significant number of propositions about them.

What is important is that personal knowledge involves more than knowledge of propositions. No matter how much you tell me about Amy, no matter how many facts about her I learn, if I haven't met her then I can't be said to know her in the sense required for personal knowledge.

Personal knowledge thus seems to involve coming to know a certain number of propositions *in a particular way*.

Procedural Knowledge

The second kind of knowledge is procedural knowledge, or knowledge how to do something. The claims to know how to juggle and how to drive are claims to have **procedural knowledge**.

Procedural knowledge clearly differs from propositional knowledge. It is possible to know all of the theory behind driving a car (i.e. to have all of the relevant propositional knowledge) without actually knowing how to drive a car (i.e. without having the procedural knowledge).

You may know which pedal is the accelerator and which is the brake. You may know where the handbrake is and what it does. You may know where your blind spots are when you need to check them. But until you get behind the wheel and learn how to apply all this theory, you do not know how to drive.

Knowing how to drive involves possessing a skill, being able to do something, which is very different to merely knowing a collection of facts.

Propositional Knowledge

Although there are several different types of knowledge, the primary concern of epistemology is propositional knowledge. This is knowledge of facts, knowledge that such and such is the case.

The difference between the three types of knowledge is not as sharp as it might at first appear.

Personal knowledge does seem to involve knowledge of at least some propositions. Simply having met someone is not enough to know them (in the personal knowledge sense); you also have to know a few things about them (in the propositional knowledge sense).

Procedural knowledge also seems to involve some propositional knowledge. If you know how to drive a car (in the procedural knowledge sense) then you presumably know certain facts about driving (e.g. which way the car will go if you turn the steering wheel to the left).

What is important is that propositional knowledge is not enough to give you either personal knowledge or procedural knowledge. Personal knowledge involves acquiring propositional knowledge in a certain way, and procedural knowledge may entail propositional knowledge, but the same propositional knowledge certainly does not entail procedural knowledge.

Whatever the connections between the various types of knowledge there may be, however, it is propositional knowledge that is in view in most epistemology.

The Tripartite Theory of Knowledge

There is a tradition that goes back as far as Plato that holds that three conditions must be satisfied in order for one to possess knowledge. This account, known as the tripartite theory of knowledge, analyses knowledge as justified true belief. **The tripartite theory says that if you believe something, with justification, and it is true, then you know it; otherwise, you do not.**

Belief

The first condition for knowledge, according to the tripartite theory, is belief. Unless one believes a thing, one cannot know it. Even if something is true, and one has excellent reasons for believing that it is true, one cannot know it without believing it.

Truth

The second condition for knowledge, according to the tripartite theory, is truth. If one knows a thing then it must be true. No matter how well justified or sincere a belief, if it is not true that it cannot constitute knowledge. If a long-held belief is discovered to be false, then one must concede that what was thought to be known was in fact not known. What is false cannot be known; knowledge must be knowledge of the truth.

Justification

The third condition for knowledge is justification. In order to know a thing, it is not enough to merely correctly believe it to be true; one must also have a good reason for doing so. Lucky guesses cannot constitute knowledge; we can only know what we have good reason to believe. The tripartite theory of knowledge is intuitively very plausible. It is still used as a working model by philosophers most of the time.

Sources of Knowledge

Each of us possesses a great deal of knowledge. We know about ourselves; we know about the world around us; we know about abstract concepts and ideas. Philosophers have often wondered where this knowledge ultimately comes from.

Of course, we learn a lot of things from books, from the media, and from other people. To process information from these sources, however, we must already know many things: how to

read, how to reason, who to trust. To learn these things requires yet more knowledge. What, then, is the most fundamental way of acquiring knowledge?

There are two competing traditions concerning the ultimate source of our knowledge: empiricism and rationalism.

Empiricism

Empiricists hold that all of our knowledge is ultimately derived from our senses or our experiences. They therefore deny the existence of innate knowledge, i.e. knowledge that we possess from birth. Empiricism fits well with the scientific world-view that places an emphasis on experimentation and observation. It struggles, however, to account for certain types of knowledge, e.g. knowledge of pure mathematics or ethics.

Rationalism

Rationalists hold that at least some of our knowledge is derived from reason alone, and that reason plays an important role in the acquisition of all of our knowledge. There is clearly a limit to what we can learn through abstract thought, but the rationalist's claim is that reason play a role in observation, and so that the mind is more fundamental than the senses in the process of knowledge-acquisition.

Empiricism

Empiricism is the theory that experience is of primary importance in giving us knowledge of the world. Whatever we learn, according to empiricists, we learn through perception. Knowledge without experience, with the possible exception of trivial semantic and logical truths, is impossible.

Classical Empiricism

Classical empiricism is characterised by a rejection of innate, in-born knowledge or concepts. John Locke, well known as an empiricist, wrote of the mind being a tabula rasa, a "blank slate", when we enter the world. At birth we know nothing; it is only subsequently that the mind is furnished with information by experience.

Radical Empiricism

In its most radical forms, empiricism holds that all of our knowledge is derived from the senses. This position leads naturally to the verificationist principle that the meaning of statements is inextricably tied to the experiences that would confirm them. According to this principle, it is only if it is possible to empirically test a claim that the claim has meaning. As all of our information comes from our senses, it is impossible for us to talk about that which we have not experienced. Statements that are not tied to our experiences are therefore meaningless.

This principle, which was associated with a now unpopular position called logical positivism, renders religious and ethical claims literally nonsensical. No observations

could confirm religious or ethical claims, therefore those claims are meaningless. Radical empiricism thus requires the abandonment of religious and ethical discourse and belief.

Moderate Empiricism

More moderate empiricists, however, allow that there may be some cases in which the senses do not ground our knowledge, but hold that these are exceptions to a general rule. Truths such as “there are no four-sided triangles” and “ $7+5=12$ ” need not be investigated in order to be known, but all significant, interesting knowledge, the empiricist claims, comes to us from experience. This more moderate empiricism strikes many as more plausible than its radical alternative.

Rationalism

Rationalism holds, in contrast to empiricism, that it is reason, not experience, that is most important for our acquisition of knowledge. There are three distinct types of knowledge that the rationalist might put forward as supporting his view and undermining that of the empiricist.

First, the rationalist might argue that we possess at least some innate knowledge. We are not born, as the empiricist John Locke thought, with minds like blank slates onto which experience writes items of knowledge. Rather, even before we experience the world there are some things that we know. We at least possess some basic instincts; arguably, we also possess some innate concepts, such as a faculty for language.

Second, the rationalist might argue that there are some truths that, though not known innately, can be worked out independent of experience of the world. These might be truths of logic or mathematics, or ethical truths. We can know the law of the excluded middle, answers to sums, and the difference between right and wrong, without having to base that knowledge in experience.

Third, the rationalist might argue that there are some truths that, though grounded in part in experience, cannot be derived from experience alone. Aesthetic truths, and truths about causation, for instance, seem to many to be of this kind. Two people may observe the same object, yet reach contradictory views as to its beauty or ugliness. This shows that aesthetic qualities are not presented to us by our senses, but rather are overlaid onto experience by reason. Similarly, we do not observe causation, we merely see one event followed by another; it is the mind, not the world, that provides us with the idea that the former event causes the latter.