

## *Knowledge*

Knowledge is, roughly, a mental state in which the subject is in full possession of accurate information about some aspect of reality. We have to say 'roughly', because achieving greater precision has proved notoriously difficult. Apart from questions about the exact nature of knowledge, enquiries also focus on whether knowledge is the most important mental state (in relation to reality), and its role in human affairs. 'Epistemology' is the study of knowledge, and other aspects of our 'cognitive' life. Studies of the nature of knowledge try to analyse it into components, and the orthodox view says it is truths which are believed for good reasons.

Two possible rivals for the central place in epistemology are mere true belief, and understanding. If one thought that animals had many true beliefs, but very few 'reasons' for them, this might be the only cognitive requirement for a successful existence, especially if people also are guided by unthinking true beliefs, for which any supporting reasons are forgotten or never known. 'Knowledge' would then be marginalised, as a grand but less important concept. One strategy is to give equal status to both, the first as 'animal' knowledge, and the second as 'reflective' knowledge.

It also has been suggested that the real aim of our mental efforts is understanding, rather than knowledge. The latter may be a list of trivial and unconnected facts, but understanding has the depth required to cope with a changing world. It may be, though, that understanding is just a lot of interconnected knowledge. We would assume that anyone with deep understanding must also be very knowledgeable. To understand something we must grasp its structure, mechanisms and causal processes, which may involve a clear mental model, rather than a set of truths. While we may know a lot of pure trivialities, understanding must grasp what is important.

A third response to the standard idea that knowledge is truths believed for good reasons is to treat knowledge as such a basic concept that it is an unanalysable primitive. This 'knowledge first' approach says that instead of analysing knowledge, we should use knowledge as a basis for analysing other epistemic concepts (describing belief, for example, as the mental state which aspires to knowledge). The main concept is said to be the successful one – knowledge – and it explains the other concepts.

If we stick with the traditional analysis of knowledge (as true beliefs with reasons), then we can start by distinguishing three forms of knowledge., as when I say 'I know Chicago' or 'I know how to play chess' or 'I know the date of the Fire of London'. The first is knowledge by acquaintance, implying direct experience, possibly in a non-linguistic form; the second is procedural knowledge (knowing 'how'), which is an internalised skill; the third is propositional knowledge, implying a clear grasp of a thought or a sentence, probably in linguistic form. Most discussions centre on propositional knowledge, and it may be that the other two can always be translated into that form. Procedural knowledge was once seen as quite separate, but the division actually seems to be rather blurred (given that highly skilled people are usually very articulate about their skill). Similarly you would not qualify as knowing Chicago if you could not give a reasonable description of its layout (though you would struggle to articulate your knowledge of a blackbird's song).

The preference for the traditional analysis rests on three observations. It is normally agreed that 'I know that p, but don't believe p' makes little sense, as does 'I know that p, but p is not true'. Also 'I have a true belief that p, but no reason to believe p' also looks like an admission that you don't actually know this truth (since your being correct about p may be pure luck). Hence ordinary talk seems to endorse the idea that knowledge is true belief with reasons. Once we delve into the analysis we will obviously need a theory of truth, and there will be a lot to say about the reasons (the 'justification'). The concept of belief is central in this approach, with knowledge seen as its successful form, and so we must consider the nature, aims and causes of beliefs. After all, beliefs (rather than knowledge) control our actions.

We would be baffled by a request to list all of our beliefs. Most beliefs (such as where some item is kept in the garage) are only recalled when needed. Many beliefs have never even entered our minds (such as that Germany is larger than Wales), and innumerable implied beliefs (such as that the German border could surround Wales) would never occur to us unless they were suggested. Beliefs also have an unarticulated but essential background, such as the layout of the garage. This last point suggests 'belief holism', that beliefs just do not exist singly, but come in large groups, or even exist only as a single system. If beliefs were necessarily linguistic, this would encourage the holistic view (because of shared words and concepts), but it is tempting to attribute beliefs to animals, if we are trying to explain their behaviour. If you throw a ball for a dog, and then don't let go of the ball, its behaviour strongly suggests a belief. Mathematical beliefs (in a distinct language) could be quite isolated from our other beliefs.

An important question is whether we can control what we believe. It takes an intellectual effort to deny that you are seeing a cat, if a cat is in front of you. When walking down the street we experience innumerable unthinking beliefs. Perhaps no one ever chooses what they believe, and we merely respond to experience? However, we can choose which experiences to have (by selecting a newspaper, or designing an experiment), and thus shape our beliefs by control at a higher level. That invites the question of whether we must believe that we believe something, and hence whether knowledge requires knowing that you know. If belief is defined as a state which aims at truth, then how the facts are perceived will inevitably trigger the belief. If belief is just a strong feeling of commitment, that is more likely to be under our control. A third option is that belief aims only at fitting the experiences, with 'truth' a more remote ideal.

The traditional view is that you either do or do not know something, and we can search for precise criteria to distinguish these. Modern views are more flexible. The 'fallibilist' view allows that someone might 'know', despite the possibility of being wrong. The 'contextualist' view says that I might be an expert in a pub but an ignoramus in a seminar (with the words 'know' or 'justified' varying in meaning). In society it is said that 'knowledge is power', and hence knowledge is given status (by titles and qualifications), and individuals are set up as 'experts'. This breeds some suspicion that our concept of knowledge is manipulated, for chauvinistic reasons, and is in need of more drastic deconstruction. If society decides who does or does not 'know', a much wider account will be needed.