

What is Knowledge?

Introduction

The term 'epistemology' is derived from the Greek word 'episteme', meaning 'knowledge'. Epistemology is commonly known as the theory of knowledge, and is also known as the study of justified belief or 'the study of our right to have the beliefs we have' (Kirwan, 1995, p.245).

As the study of knowledge, epistemology is concerned with questions such as...

- What is the nature of knowledge?
- What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge?
- What are its sources?
- What can be known?

As the study of justified belief, epistemology is concerned with questions such as...

- How we are to understand the notion of justification?

- What makes beliefs justified?
- Is justification internal or external to one's own mind?

‘The questions of what we can know, how we can know what we know, and what knowledge is are central to philosophy as a whole. This is because other branches of philosophy take for granted the possibility of knowledge in order to have anything to discuss at all’ (Law, 2007, p.49).

Ways of knowing: reason and experience

Experience

One way knowledge is attained is through the senses and experience.

Empiricism designates a theory of knowledge. According to empiricism, all genuine knowledge is based on or derived from experience.

However, can our senses always be trusted in the acquisition of knowledge?

Is there a way to attain knowledge that can overcome the unreliable or sometimes illusionary nature of our sense experience?

Reason

Knowledge, it is said, can also be attained by a process of reasoning.

Rationalism designates a certain kind of theory of knowledge, according to which reason (reason independent of our experience) is the source of all genuine knowledge.

Types of knowledge

Generally, the type of knowledge epistemologists are concerned with is *propositional knowledge*, or knowledge of facts.

Examples of this type of knowledge include statements such as ‘a cat has four legs’, or ‘three times three equals nine’.

Propositional knowledge is concerned with what it is to know some proposition (some ‘p’), where if you know that p, then p must be true.

This type of knowledge is often contrasted with practical knowledge.

Relevant distinctions: *a priori* / *a posteriori*, and analytic / synthetic

In relation to propositions, we should be aware of the difference between analytic and synthetic propositions. A proposition is analytic if it is true or false by virtue of its meaning. Examples of analytic propositions include 'All triangles have three sides' and 'All wives are married'. A proposition is synthetic if it is true or false not by virtue of its meaning, but by virtue of how that proposition relates to the way the world is. Examples of synthetic propositions include 'All men are unhappy' and 'Roses are red'.

Applying the distinctions

We may think that the above distinctions map onto one another, so that *a priori* knowledge is always knowledge of analytic propositions, and *a posteriori* knowledge is always knowledge of synthetic propositions. But although all analytic statements are known *a priori*, it is far from clear that all synthetic statements are known *a posteriori*.

It is worth noting that Immanuel Kant, a philosopher who was dissatisfied with the method of both the rationalists and the empiricists, held that some beliefs are synthetic *a priori* – meaning that they are known without reference to experience even though they are not true purely by virtue of the meaning of the terms involved. Kant's best known example of a synthetic *a priori* proposition is ' $7 + 5 = 12$ '. He says that although we know this to be true in advance of experience, it is not analytic because the idea of '12' does not 'contain' the ideas of '5' and '7'. Put differently, our concept of '12' does not incorporate the concepts of '5' and '7' in the same way that the concept of 'wife' incorporates the concepts of 'female human being' and 'being married'. (But, for Kant, while we can make synthetic *a priori* claims, 'these claims are not about reality *per se*, but only about reality as it is experienced by beings such as ourselves. It is only because we can possess certain cognitive principles enabling us to experience the world that we can make certain claims *a priori* about the world as it appears' (Kuehn, 1999).)

In epistemology, a further contrast is made between *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge. Where our knowledge of the truth or falsity of a proposition does not depend on experience, that knowledge is said to be *a priori*. Take, for example, the proposition 'All triangles have three sides'. We know that this is true independent of experience. Where, however, our knowledge of the truth or falsity of a proposition is dependent on experience, that knowledge is said to be *a posteriori*. Take, for example, the proposition 'All swans are white'. The truth or falsity of this proposition can only be established through experience (through which we would discover that the proposition is actually false).

Justified true belief as knowledge

Epistemologists often define propositional knowledge as ***justified true belief***. This definition emphasises that mere belief is not enough to constitute knowledge – one must give justified reasons for that belief *and* the belief must be true:

S knows that P iff...

P is true,

S believes that P, and

S is justified in believing that P.

The idea that a justified true belief constitutes knowledge (first put forward by Plato) is a notion that has held fast throughout the history of Western philosophy.

Various attempts have been made to revise the justified true belief account of knowledge:

Roderick Chisholm (1957):

S knows that P iff...

S accepts P,

S has adequate evidence for P, and

P is true.

A.J. Ayer (1990[1956]):

S knows that P iff...

P is true,

S is sure that P is true, and

S has the right to be sure that P is true.

Why do we need a theory of knowledge?

- Aristotle stated that 'All men desire to know'.
- '[K]nowledge brings great benefits. The release of ignorance is foremost among them... the need for understanding... is one of the most fundamental demands of the human condition' (Rescher, 2003, p.xvii).
- Reasons related to the distinction between appearance and reality – a distinction that raises issues that have plagued philosophers for thousands of years.

- Epistemologists attempt to overcome the sources of error as well the imperfections that stand in the way of our attaining knowledge.

To consider...

Think about what has been said in the lecture about the difference between knowledge and belief, and about why truth, belief and justification have traditionally been considered as necessary conditions for knowledge.

Consider also: why should we care what the concept of knowledge is?

Bibliography

- Nicholas Rescher, *Epistemology: An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (NY: State University of New York Press, 2003).
- Stephen Law, *Philosophy* (London: Dorling Kindersely Ltd., 2007).
- A. J. Ayer [1956], *The Problem of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).
- Roderick M. Chisholm, *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1957).
- Christopher Kirwan, entry on 'Epistemology, problems of.', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, edited by Ted Honderich (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- Manfred Kuehn, entry on 'Kant', *Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1999).

Reading for students

Essential reading

- John Hospers, *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis* [1956], fourth edn. (London: Routledge, 1997), ch.2, 'What can we know?', and pp.136-140, on the *a priori* / *a posteriori*, and *analytic* / *synthetic* distinctions, and on the synthetic *a priori*.
- J. L. Evans, *Knowledge and Infallibility* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1978), ch. 9 ('Knowledge and Belief'). (I will supply.)

Recommended reading

- A. J. Ayer [1956], *The Problem of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), ch.1.
- Bertrand Russell [1912], *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), ch.1.