

INTRODUCTION INTO EPISTEMOLOGY: WHAT CAN WE KNOW?

A. INTRODUCTION:

I believe it is reasonable to say that nobody wants to be willfully ignorant. We have the sense of curiosity about the world, a desire to know things, and perhaps even a deep-seated hunger for ultimate intelligibility. In fact, Aristotle contends that philosophy begins with the very natural desire to know what is true.

Indeed, we long to make sense of things. Whether it deals with what is “out there,” your surroundings, your goals, your relationships, or even your own personal identity, development, and being, you long for understanding. Moreover, it becomes embarrassing at times to discover you fail because of either inaccuracy or ignorance. Not only is knowledge interesting and at times provocative on its own, but it can also be powerful.

All throughout the history of philosophy people two critical questions have been asked, namely, (1) what do we really know? (2) How can we be certain that we have the truth? Thus, epistemology is the philosophical study of knowledge. Here we systematically investigate whether, how, and to what extent we know something. We call for a careful study at knowledge asking whether we really know what we think we know and how we know. The questions asked and the answers that have been given have been valuable as we seek to not only establish a worldview that is not only viable and existentially relevant, but one that can stand up against the ups and downs of living life, the plight of our humanity, and generate creativity, ingenuity, and industry, propelling us into the future.

Consider the following words from philosopher Dr. Douglas Groothuis. He observes:

The word truth is a staple in every language. We cannot imagine a human language lacking the concept of truth. Such a language would never inform anyone of anything; it would lack any intellectual access to reality. No language *qua* [as] language could be so constrained (although some political and celebrity ‘discourse’ come close). The idea of truth is part of the intellectual oxygen we breathe. Whenever we state an opinion, defend or critique an argument, ask a question, or investigate one kind of assertions or another, we presuppose the concept of truth-even if we don’t directly state the word, even if we deny that truth is real or knowable.

The notion of truth haunts us, ferreting out our shabby thinking, our lame excuses, our willful ignorance and our unfair attacks on the views of others, both the living and the dead. Conversely, when our own ideas are misrepresented or our personal character falsely maligned, we object by appealing to something firm that should settle the issue-namely, the truth. Truth seems to stand over like a silent referee, arms folded confidently, ears

open, eyes staring intently and authoritatively into everything and missing nothing. Even when an important truth seems out of reach on vital matters, we yearn for it as we yearn for a long-lost friend or the parent we never knew. Yet when the truth unmasks and convicts us, and refuse to return its gaze, we seek to banish it in favor of our own self-serving and protection version of reality.¹

In the broad scope of philosophy personal beliefs are considered to be true when they depict things as they truly are. Personal beliefs are false when they depict things inaccurately. Thus, the history of philosophy affirms this distinction. But where philosophers differ is what makes true beliefs true and false beliefs false. In the words, they differ about the status of “facts” and the nature of “portraying the world accurately.”

To be sure, we can have beliefs that are not true, yet still not have knowledge. Something more-a justification for what is believed is required. Thus, when one makes a truth-claim, here is where we ask questions like:

- (1) What is your justification for this truth-claim
- (2) How did you come to that conclusion?
- (3) What evidence do you have for this truth-claim?
- (4) Does this truth-claim possess explanatory power?
- (5) Is this truth-claim workable?
- (6) Is this truth-claim pertinent and germane to our individuality, our becoming, and our life’s projects?
- (7) Is this truth-claim logically coherent?
- (8) Is this truth-claim viable?

Thus, here is a summary of different philosophical positions on what is considered to be true. You will notice that my personal combinationalism test for verifying truth-claims incorporates some of them in order to have the most anti-reductionistic approach to truth-claims since I recognize that ideas have power; good ideas have good consequences and bad ideas have bad consequences.

B. MAJOR VIEWS REGARDING THE NATURE OF TRUTH:

Know these following views regarding the nature of truth and *how* justifications are considered:

1. **Coherence Theory:** Truth is defined in terms of internal propositional consistency (Spinoza; Hegel; Blanchard):
 - a. All statements within a system must be logically consistent in that same system for the conclusion to be true.

¹ Douglas Groothuis,

- b. If the system is logically connected and is consistent within itself and occupies a proper relationship with other judgments in that system, then, it is true. If it does not, it is.
- c. Coherence is like the relationship of all sorts of jigsaw puzzle pieces. The goal is to find the right pieces, assembling the largest possible picture.
- d. Now, these form a conception of the world, even though there is no independent world, and so are true. For example, the belief that a room has walls seem to be true because it coheres with what you see, what you can touch, what you know about other rooms, and many other things you believe. If you thought that the walls of the room are flexible, that belief would be false because it would inconsistent with all of your other beliefs and perceptions (you cannot stretch the walls; if you press on them, they will not bend, and so on).

2. **Pragmatic Theory** (Charles Peirce; William James; John Dewey):

- a. Truth is understood in terms of experience, practice, results, or that which works.
- b. If true assumptions lead to actions that have utility or bring beneficial results, they are considered true.
- c. Thus, we would consider beliefs to be true if using those beliefs allow us to accomplish our objectives in the world and to get what we want. For example, beliefs about the existence and nature of electricity are true, insofar as they allow us to build electricity powered machines, like lights, clocks, and televisions.
- e. False beliefs are those that are ultimately not useful. Using false beliefs does not help us accomplish our objectives in the world. For example, the beliefs about magic elf-stones are false since they do not work in fighting evil.

3. **Intentional/Subjective Theory: Feelings, Sincerity, or Intentions:**

- a. A truth statement must correspond to its referent in the real world or the statement possesses no more value than one's own mere opinions.
- a. If this is the case, then there can be no objective truth.

- b. Truth is defined in terms of emotions, feelings, sincerity, or intentions.
 - c. Statements and affirmations do not contain truth-value as in objectivism; instead, truth is rooted within the subjective characteristics of an individual.
4. **Correspondence Theory of Truth** (Aristotle; Bertrand Russell):
- a. Truth is that which corresponds to reality.
 - b. Truth is telling it like it is.
 - c. It identifies things as they actually are.
 - d. Truth can never fail, diminish, change or be extinguished.
 - e. Under the correspondence view we have significant type in the history of philosophy: Thomas Reid's Scottish Common Sense or Direct Realism and Thomas Aquinas' Moderate Realism:
 - 1. Reid's Direct Realism says we have a direct awareness of external reality. For example, we see the car on the road not just an idea of it in our minds. This view appeals to common life in the sense that we take things as they are in how we live in every sphere of life. Though we can make mistakes due to a failure of making accurate observations, we can accurately know the world around us.
 - 2. Aquinas' Moderate Realism: A thing exists in the mind as a universal, and in reality it exists as a particular. We extract the Form into our mind via five senses and thus, the within the mind whereby we recreate the form, the knower and known become one; objective reality is possible.

C. HOW TRUTH CAN BE KNOWN

Appearances can be deceiving; many things appear to be true, but in reality they are not. At first glance a straight steel rod immersed in a glass of water may look as though it's bent, but it isn't. If it is so easy to misperceive the true nature of physical things, how we justify our truth-claims becomes even more a necessary study.

Let's explore the various ways in which "truth" can be known:

- 1. **Correspondence View:** Truth is what corresponds to reality and is known through objective means (Aristotle, Bertrand Russell):

- a. It identifies things as they actually are.
 - b. It tells it like it is.
 - c. It does not diminish, change, fail, or extinguish.
2. **Relativism** (Protagoras; Joseph Fletcher):
- a. Denies universal, totalizing, absolute truths that apply to all people, at all times, and everywhere.
 - b. Relativists appeal to personal autonomy, power structures, situation, and autonomy rather than an objective foundation as the basis for truth, values, and meaning.
3. **Subjectivism** (Edmund Husserl; Martin Buber; Jean-Paul Sartre) (Not subjective-intentional view):
- a. We have some kind of direct contact with object of belief. For example, Sartre contends that the world is a system of objects where meaning and values are organized in view of one's personal worldview. Thus, truth is no longer required to be subsumed within a universal.
 - b. But this also means that we have the freedom to choose because it is part of what it means to be in human. So, Sartre rejects bio-mechanical determinism (where free will is denied) or some type of divine or atomistic determinism.
 - c. So, while truth is chosen in relation to free will, Sartre recognizes that we are our choices. In fact, we cannot help but choose. Our choices then shape our humanity. In fact, our essence is determined by our choices.
 - d. Our choice to choose also means that we are accountability for our choices. We may seek information or advice, but we are ultimately responsibility for everything we do.
4. **Rationalism**: Rene Descartes; Benedictus de Spinoza; Gottfried Leibniz; Parmenides): Look to logical reason instead of empirical data for origin and justification of beliefs.

When knowledge is derived from reason, inquired independently of or prior to sense experience we call this "a priori knowledge." For example, $1 = 1 = 2$ is a priori knowledge. Another example would be "All bachelors are unmarried."

5. **Empiricism** (John Locke; David Hume; George Berkeley):

Our source of knowledge comes from experience of one or more of the 5 senses.

When knowledge depends entirely on sense experience we call this *a posteriori* knowledge. For example, the dog is barking; the cat is on the mat, and Deborah drew a triangle.

6. **Divine Revelation:** Truth-claims are justified by divine revelation (e.g., religious sacred texts known as “special theology” vs. “natural theology”). Thus, a particular truth-claim is justified by a religious or sacred text of authority.

7. **Mysticism:** Some type of direct or mediated divine experience. Thus, a particular truth-claim is rooted in a divine encounter or experience.

Once again, a combinationalism test of truth may be used as long as the justifications are not incoherent in and of themselves.

D. ONLINE ASSIGNMENT:

Now, after you explain AND justify or defend what you consider to be the best view regarding the nature of truth, I want you to respond to this rather frank confession made by the famous novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley (1894-1963):

For, like so many of my contemporaries, I took it for granted that there was no meaning [to life]. This was partly due to the fact that I shared the common belief that the scientific picture of an abstraction from reality was a true picture of reality as a whole; partly also for other non-intellectual reasons. I had motives for not wanting the world to have no meaning; consequently, I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption.

Most ignorance is vincible ignorance. We don't know because we don't want to know. It is our will that decides how and upon what subjects we shall use our intelligence. Those who detect no meaning in this world generally do so because, for one reason or another, it suits their books that the world should be meaningless [Aldous Huxley, *Ends and Means*, 3rd edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1937), 312.