

Reflection: Understanding as a Condition of Knowledge – Not Truth

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Abstract: This short paper is a reflection on the lecture “What is Philosophy?” by Robert Brandom at the Royal Institute of Philosophy. In reflection, this lecture provokes an epistemic thought: understanding is a foundational epistemic aspect, and should take precedence, or even replace truth as a condition in the traditional analysis of knowledge.

Introduction

Many metaphilosophers have attempted to describe the nature of the philosophical enterprise. It is interesting that there are so many well-thought-out attempts, yet the question remains: what is the nature of philosophy? This is part of an ongoing series of reflections—thoughts provoked by other thoughts—that is going to first convey the ideas that provoked this thought by means of explication and summation of the view; in this case, of Robert Brandom’s 2023 lecture, "What is Philosophy?" Then there will be an interpretation of this thought provided. Lastly, there will be a novel reflection. This is not to be thought of as a review, as there will be multiple positions provided, nor will this paper be critiquing Brandom’s view as either right or wrong, necessarily, but as a point from which to understand the thoughts that were provoked. This paper intends to argue that understanding is a foundational epistemological aspect. Understanding is foundational to knowledge, and this understanding should take precedence over, or even replace truth as a condition for the traditional analysis of knowledge. This paper will use informal citations only.

Robert Brandom's "What is Philosophy?" and Interpretation

Robert Brandom has different variations of this lecture, and the one with which this paper is concerned is the one given at the Royal Institute of Philosophy. In this lecture, Brandom suggests many things. He suggests that philosophers discern a nature as revealed by the history of philosophy (Brandom, 2023). Another suggestion is that philosophy is broadly a cognitive enterprise; it focuses on understanding, not necessarily knowledge (Brandom, 2023). It is important to note here that the specific word "truth" is not used, suggesting an epistemic negation more broadly. Philosophers, in this way, make explicit that which is implicit, but explication is not the analysis of meanings but the opening of them up to rational criticism (Brandom, 2023). This spins the history of philosophy into its own web, which is where it can derive its' nature from—from the history (Brandom, 2023).

Brandom gets here by various different means. The most important is the analysis of concepts. Suggesting that reflection is self-consciousness. That is, explicating our own general intuitions in an expressive rather than explanatory manner (Brandom, 2023). The point comes from the idea that we are not only responsible for answering and demanding reason but that humans are different from other animals in that humans can make claims that are, at their core, concepts (Brandom, 2023). In interpreting this, there are obvious correlations with Hegel here, and Brandom gives this (Brandom, 2023). Though there are some differences.

“It is natural to suppose that, before philosophy enters upon its subject proper – namely, the actual knowledge of what truly is – it is necessary to come first to an understanding concerning knowledge, which is regarded either as the instrument to get hold of the Absolute, or as the medium through which one discovers it.” (Georg Hegel, “Phenomenology of Spirit”)

While Brandom and Hegel agree that philosophy concerns itself with understanding, Hegel sees this understanding as concerning knowledge, while Brandom suggests it stops at understanding. Rather, Brandom suggests that the major points of philosophical inquiry are historically driven, and while there is some agreement with this by Hegel, as shown, Hegel sees an epistemically pragmatic response. In a way, Brandom sort of rips philosophy from an epistemic enterprise in terms of discovering truth, unless we can also consider an understanding as a foundational epistemological aspect.

Reflection

This is the point that strikes me: understanding as a condition for knowledge. The Gettier cases have clearly suggested that something needs to be done about the traditional analysis of knowledge. Some have tried to add a fourth condition, and others have suggested that the kind of justification is the problem. I have for a long time been a foundationalist, to some extent. My previous view was that good justification is derived from a foundational point of agreement (though this point may also be questioned further infiniutum). The view is pragmatic; it starts

from a shared intuition and builds into other things we can say we "know." While I still find value in this, understanding as a fourth condition does not conflict with this, even if it replaces truth as a condition, which I argue it ought.

The first point to address is that adding this condition does not conflict with the pragmatic view I hold. Adding a fourth condition merely adds another constraint; it makes requirements for what we consider knowledge more stringent. However, my previous view only looked deeper into the justification used. The two are compatible.

The more pressing problem, however, is that of swapping the truth condition with an understanding. Surely, it is thought that we cannot say we "know" something unless it is true. However, if that is the case, then we are doomed to skepticism. This comes in light of Immanuel Kant, as follows:

"What objects may be in themselves, and apart from all this receptivity of our sensibility, remains completely unknown to us." (Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Pure Reason")

This is to point out that we have senses from which to experience the noumena—the objects as they actually are. We are stuck in the phenomenal realm—the point from which we experience reality. The phenomenal realm acts as a sort of "rose-colored glasses" that obscure what is actually the case. In other words, pure, unadulterated truth is impossible to experience.

This being said, we can replace the unobtainable (truth) with that which we already have—understanding. Kant also points out that:

"Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind. The understanding can intuit nothing, the senses can think nothing. Only through their union can knowledge arise." (Immanuel Kant, "Critique of Pure Reason")

The major point I want to bring up here is that Kant's point suggests that we can indeed remove truth as a condition for knowledge, replace it with an understanding, and consider proper justification as experience. While I disagree with the view of experience as justification as a quasi-foundationalist, and this is outside the scope of this paper, I do agree with swapping understanding for truth as a condition for knowledge.

So, to make this explicit: Because we cannot grasp the noumena unadulterated, truth is inaccessible. If truth is inaccessible but we have an understanding, then the knowledge condition of truth ought to be replaced with understanding. The main question now is, "What is understanding?"

"No one perceives that he understands except through the fact that he understands something, for to understand something is prior to understanding that one understands. And so the soul comes to the actual realization of its existence through the fact that it understands and perceives." (Hannah Arendt, "De Veritate")

The major point I want to put emphasis on here is that we only "understand" understanding by means of understanding *something*. Understanding cannot be known on its own, but only by means of *the object of our understanding*. When I understand that I am writing

a paper right now, it merely means I am acknowledging and processing what can be justified and confidently affirmed as having taken place.

This is different from truth. Justification, confidence, or credence do not say that *it is* the case. Thus, understanding is not truth, and truth is not a condition for knowledge. Knowledge is much more pragmatic in its usage than this. When an agent claims to know something, it does not mean that they have an awareness of the pure objective truth, as their claim can always be challenged, and it will be. Instead, there is a confidence or credence level to which the agent understands; they understand in terms of their justification what has taken place. Thus, truth ought to be replaced with understanding as a condition for knowledge in the traditional analysis of knowledge.