Knowledge, truth, and justification

Epistemology is concerned with a variety of questions about knowledge and related topics. Certainly one of the most important questions is ‘‘What is the extent of our knowledge?’’ Some philosophers, especially those in the ‘‘common sense’’ tradition, would say that we know pretty much those things that we ordinarily think we know. They would tell us, for example, that we know that there are other people, that they think and feel, that we were alive yesterday, that there are cars and dogs, and so on. They would tell us that we know a lot about our immediate physical surroundings, other people, and the past. Others would add that we know various ethical and moral truths and some would also say that they know various truths about God and God’s attitude toward mankind. Still other philosophers, influenced by various forms of skepticism, would say that we know much less than any of this, and the most extreme skeptics would say that we really know nothing at all.

Truth

There are many theories about the nature of truth and about what makes a proposition or a belief true or false. One of the oldest and perhaps most widely held is the correspondence theory of truth. The correspondence theory makes two main claims. First, a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to the facts. Second, a proposition is false if and only if it fails to correspond to the facts. Advocates of the correspondence theory often add a third claim, that the truth of a proposition or belief is dependent on the facts or upon the way the world is. Such a view is suggested by Aristotle, who wrote, ‘‘It is not because we think truly that you are pale, that you are pale; but because you are pale we who say this have the truth.’ The proposition that you are pale is true because you are pale. The proposition that you are pale is true because of, or in virtue of the fact that you are pale.

According to the correspondence theory of truth, a proposition is not true because of what we believe about it. The truth of the proposition that someone is pale, for example, does not depend on our believing it or on what we believe about it. The proposition is true if and only if someone is pale. It is true, as Aristotle notes, because of the fact that someone is pale.

Moreover, according to the correspondence theory, one and the same proposition cannot be both true and false. The proposition that you are pale cannot be both true and false. Neither can the proposition be ‘‘true for you and false for me.’’

One alternative to the correspondence theory is the pragmatic theory of truth. A central insight of the pragmatic theory is that true beliefs are generally useful and false beliefs are not. If a doctor wants to cure a patient, it is useful for the doctor to have true beliefs about what will cure the patient. If a man wants to go to Boston, true beliefs about which road to take are generally more useful than false beliefs.

Noting this connection, the pragmatic theory tells us that a proposition is true if and only if believing it or acting on it is, or would be, useful (in the long run). Roughly, a belief is true if and only if it is useful or expedient. William James, the great American pragmatist, wrote, ‘‘The true is only the expedient in the way of our behaving, expedient in almost any fashion, and expedient in the long run and on the whole course.

Another theory of truth is the coherence theory of truth. let us consider the following example that we may take to illustrate the concept. Suppose that I believe the following propositions: (i) I have the sense experience of something white in my hand, (ii) I have the experience of something round in my hand, (iii) I have the experience of something cold in my hand. The proposition, (iv) there is a snowball in my hand, coheres with (i)(iii). It would seem that (iv) better coheres with (i)(iii) than some other propositions, e.g. that I have a hot lump of coal in my hand.

Philosophers take the fact that a proposition coheres or ‘‘hangs together’’ with other propositions one believes to be indicative of its truth or a good reason to believe it’s true. In other words, they treat coherence as a source of justification. So, for example, if one believes (i)(iii), then, other things being equal, it is more reasonable to believe (iv) than that one has a hot lump of coal in one’s hand because of (iv)’s greater coherence with (i)(iii). Proponents of the coherence theory of truth, however, treat coherence not merely as a source of justification; they take coherence to be a condition of truth. They hold that for a proposition to be true is nothing more than a matter of its coherence with other propositions. Brand Blanshard, a defender of the coherence theory of truth, wrote ‘‘Assume coherence as the test [of truth], and you will be driven by the incoherence of your alternatives to the conclusion that it is also the nature of truth

Three senses of knows

In ordinary language when we say that someone knows something, we can mean different things by ‘‘knows.’’ There are different senses of ‘‘knowledge’’ or, we may say, different kinds of knowledge. Among the three most significant are (1) propositional knowledge, (2) acquaintance knowledge, and (3) ‘‘how to’’ knowledge.

Propositional knowledge is knowledge of facts or true propositions. So, consider the following examples of propositional knowledge:

(1) John knows that Caesar was assassinated.

(2) John knows that the sky is blue.

In these examples, the objects of knowledge, or what is known, are, respectively, the true propositions that Caesar was assassinated and that the sky is blue.

We may think of belief as a relation between a subject and a proposition. If the proposition one believes is true, then one’s belief is true and if the proposition one believes is false, then one’s

belief is false. We may also think of propositional knowledge as a relation between a subject and a proposition. More precisely, propositional knowledge is a relation between a subject and a true proposition.

Propositional knowledge is not the only sort of knowledge. Suppose, for example, someone made the following claims:

(3) John knows the President of the United States.

(4) John knows the Pope.

We might naturally take these claims to imply that John is acquainted with the President of the United States and that he is acquainted with the Pope. We might naturally take (3) and (4) to imply that John has met them. If we do take (3) and (4) in this way, then we are attributing acquaintance knowledge to John. To say that John has acquaintance knowledge of someone is to imply that he is acquainted with him or that he has met him. Acquaintance knowledge needs to be distinguished from propositional knowledge. Obviously, one can have a great deal of propositional knowledge about someone without having acquaintance knowledge of him. I might have, for example, a great deal of propositional knowledge about the President. I might know that he was born on such and such a date and that he attended such and such a university. I might know a great many similar true propositions about him. But though I might have a great deal of propositional knowledge about the President, it would not follow that I have acquaintance knowledge of him since I am not acquainted with him and have not met him.

In ordinary language, when we say ‘‘A knows B,’’ we are sometimes using ‘‘know’’ in the propositional sense and sometimes in the acquaintance sense. Suppose, for example, a detective says grimly, ‘‘I know this killer. He’ll strike againand soon.’’ Our detective need not be taken to mean that he has actually met the killer or that he is acquainted with him. He might mean simply that he knows that the killer is the sort that will soon strike again. He has a certain sort of propositional knowledge about the killer.

Similarly, if I am impressed with John’s vast knowledge about Caesar, I might say, ‘‘John really knows Caesar.’’ Clearly, I am implying that John has a lot of propositional knowledge about Caesar and not that John has met him. One can have acquaintance knowledge of things other than people. One can have, for example, acquaintance knowledge of Paris or the taste of a mango. If one has such knowledge of Paris, then one has been there and if one has such knowledge of the taste of a mango, then one has tasted a mango. Again, we need to distinguish knowledge of this sort from propositional knowledge. One might have much in the way of propositional knowledge about Paris, knowing what the main boulevards are, when the city was founded, knowing where various landmarks are, without having the sort of acquaintance knowledge that implies actually having been there.

Epistemic justification

First, the kind of justification knowledge requires is epistemic justification. We must note that there are kinds of justification that are not epistemic. For example, the batter who steps up to the plate might be more likely to get a hit if he believes that he will. Of course, he will probably not get a hit. Even for the best batters the odds of doing so are poor. Still, believing that he will succeed and having a positive attitude will help him. So, we may grant that he has a practical justification for his belief even if he has no epistemic justification for it.

One might have a moral or prudential justification for believing that one will recover even if one has no epistemic justification for it. Unlike prudential or moral justification, epistemic justification seems to be tied in an important way to truth, though it is hard to say in exactly what way it is connected with truth. Perhaps we might say that epistemic justification aims at truth in a way that prudential and moral justification do not. Perhaps we might say that if one is epistemically justified in believing a proposition then one's belief is likely to be true. As we shall see, philosophers differ about the connection between truth and epistemic justification. In any case, our focus will be on epistemic justification, so henceforth when I refer to justification, I shall be referring to epistemic justification.

Second, a proposition can be true and not justified. Consider the propositions: (i) the number of stars is even, and (ii) the number of stars is not even. Either (i) or (ii) is true. But clearly neither (i) nor (ii) is justified for us. We have no evidence for either. So, a proposition can be true without being justified for us.

Third, a proposition can be justified and not true. One can be justified in believing a proposition that is false. Suppose, for example, you are justified in believing that it is noon. You are justified because you have just looked at your watch around midday and it says that it is noon. But suppose that, unbeknownst to you, your watch stopped working at noon and it is now. Given your evidence, your belief is justified but false. Again, I might be justified in believing that the person I see going into the library is Lisa. I am justified because the person I see looks, dresses, and behaves just like Lisa. But suppose that, unbeknownst to me, Lisa has an identical twin and the person I see is not Lisa, but her twin. My belief that the person I saw was Lisa is false, but justified.

Fourth, we need to distinguish a proposition's being justified for a person from justifying it. Justifying a proposition is an activity that one engages in, often when one's belief has been challenged. Typically when justifying a proposition one attempts to adduce reasons in its support. In contrast, a proposition's being justified for a person is a state that one is in.

Fifth, unlike truth, justification is relative in the sense that a proposition can be justified for one person, but not for another.

Sixth, epistemic justification comes in degrees. It ranges from propositions that are certain or maximally justified for us to propositions that are just barely justified, that are just barely reasonable to accept. The propositions that 2=2, that I think, that I exist, are certain for me. In contrast, the proposition that I will be alive in three months is one that it is not certain or maximally justified for me. It is not maximally justified because the proposition that I am alive now is more justified for me than it is.

If knowledge requires justification, ‘‘What degree of justification does knowledge require?’’

Most philosophers who have defended a JTB account would say that knowledge does not require certainty. They would hold, reasonably, that we do know, for example, that Washington was the first President of the United States, that Caesar was assassinated, and many similar things. But these propositions are not certain for us, they are not as justified for us as 2=2 or I exist. I think it is fair to say that most defenders Knowledge, truth, and justification of the JTB account would say that while knowledge does not require certainty, it does require a high degree of justification.

Finally, a proposition can be epistemically justified for a person even if he does not believe it. Consider the confident batter who steps into the batter’s box. Again, more often than not, even the best batters fail to get a hit. The proposition that he won’t get a hit is epistemically justified for him. But though the proposition is justified for him, he does not believe it. Indeed, he believes its negation. Similarly, the proposition that nothing terrible will happen to him today is justified for pessimistic Malcomb, but he fails to believe it.

Some philosophers draw a distinction between a proposition’s being justified for a person and a proposition’s being ‘‘well-founded’’ for a person. To say that a proposition, p, is well-founded for a person, S, is to say that (i) p is justified for S, and (ii) S believes that p on the basis of his evidence for p. If a proposition is well-founded for a person, then he believes it and he believes it on the basis of evidence that supports it. If a proposition, p, is well-founded for a person, then he not only has good reasons for believing it, he also believes it on the basis of good reasons. In such a case, we may also say that his belief that p is well-founded or that he justifiably believes that p. We might think that knowledge requires not simply that one have evidence for one’s belief, but that one’s belief be based on one’s evidence.