

**Religion and**

**Epistemology**

How Do You Know What You Know?

“The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves and wiser people so full of doubts.”

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970)



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**pistemology** is one of the traditional divisions within Philosophy. The term comes from two Greek words, *epi-stế-mê*, which means knowledge, and *lṓ-gos*, which in the academy means “the study of,” hence, “the study of knowledge—the study of the ways by which humans acquire knowledge.”

“A man who carries a cat by the tall learns something he could learn in no other way.”

Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

Epistemologists investigate knowledge by asking about its structure, its sources, its reliability, its extent, and its formulation. This inevitably leads to the question of the relationship between truth and different kinds of knowledge and different kinds of definitions. Epistemology also demands that philosophers ask questions about the logic of propositions, linguistic matters, as well as the ultimate question of whether or not “real” knowledge is a possibility (of course, that means first deciding what “real” means).

Among these general questions, we need to ask whether there are different kinds of truth, or is truth conditional for different people in different circumstances? Could the answer even to this question be conditioned by factors such as whether one is male or female, old or young, or from or another culture? Is there only one “objective” truth? If so, how do we know this?

Another important question is how our answer to this question might function sociologically. For instance, if we assume that there is only one “objective” truth, and that our group knows it, what affect might that answer have on our relationships with other groups who may not share our view? There seems to be the potential for boundary formation in this situation, the distinction between who belongs to our “we” and who belongs to our “they.” On the other hand, what might be the consequences if one were to conclude that “truth” is conditioned and circumstantial, that it may be in some sense “subjective,” multiple, and perspectival?

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nowledge is a Problem, Why? One thing is our definition. For most scholars, knowledge is the term we use to describe our familiarity with or understanding of objective things (physical or material things or mental concepts and intellectual processes) and the skills necessary to make use of, create, manipulate, or maintain these things. Knowledge can be acquired through experience, including direct observation or participation, or it can come to us through our power of critical thinking and reasoning (our ability to create mathematics and employ it). Knowledge can be practical, e.g., knowing how to tie our shoes, to lay brick, or to perform cranial surgery. Or, it can be theoretical. The acquisition of knowledge comes through cognitive processes, perception, interpersonal communication, and reasoning.

***Knowledge is a type of belief, but belief is not necessarily knowledge.*** Basically, what we tend to mean when we use the word knowledge is a proposition that is true, that is, that what the proposition states is the actual state of the matter, and that this conditional of actuality is proven sufficiently by evidence that one is justified in believing the proposition. The differences between knowledge and belief are immediately evident. Whereas, a belief may be true, and it may be believed to be true, it does not have a sufficient justification for considering it actually true based on the evidence at hand.

Let us consider one example of the problem of knowledge. Most people think they know the past through their memories, but sometimes even our memories can be false. For example, Eleanor Goldstein and Kevin Farmer include a story in their research about a young man who is contacted by his estranged sister after many years, only to be told that she had been horribly, sexually abused by both of their parents for years when she was a child. The young man immediately began to question why he did not remember any aspect of such abuse. His doubts progressed until his mistrust of his childhood memories drove him to his own therapist. The therapist used accepted techniques to take the young man deep into his memories to shockingly discover that he too had memories of abuse by his parents. His depression over this discovery drove him to seek the counsel of a supervising therapist who, after several sessions, demonstrated to him that he had suffered what is now recognized as “False Memory Syndrome.” This discovery was not duplicated by his sister, who continued to trust the memories of her childhood sexual abuse.
She remains convinced that her brother is living in denial of the truth.

See: Goldstein and Farmer, *True Stories of False Memories* (Boca Raton, FL; Social Issues Resources Series, 1993), 117-125.

These kinds of stories are very common and beg the question of the source and reliability of knowledge. For most of us, there are common sources of knowledge: our senses (empiricism), reasoning (rationalism), but also intuition that yields a sense of certainty. It may be that all three sources are activated simultaneously. The problem is further complicate by the fact that truth can seem counterintuitive. For example, it was not only the assumption that the Bible told the truth about reality that led the church to assume for most of its history that the sun revolved around the earth, but it was also “common sense.” After all, every human who has ever lived knows that in the morning the sun is in the east and in the west in the evening; it is obviously the object in motion, not the earth. However, reasoning was able to correct traditional authority and casual observations. By using reason and careful mathematics, Copernicus was able to make calculations that later Galileo confirmed showing that, in fact, the earth revolved around the sun. The Church felt so threatened by these conclusions that it condemned Galileo into recanting his endorsement of Copernican ideas.

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ow then is reliable knowledge acquired and passed on? How much of what you believe you know depends on your trust in those who have passed on this “knowledge” to you? Mathematics is often suggested as an example of rationalism because it is not dependent on the senses, only on mental activities. It is called “*a priori”* knowledge by some, meaning knowledge that is “logically prior to experience”; it is necessarily true and indisputable on the basis of its own internal consistency. However, even most rationalists would not deny that there are other sources of knowledge. For example, we do not know that the sun is shining on a particularly beautiful morning because we did the calculations, but because we walked outside and with our senses experienced the sunshine. The problem is that, as René Descartes pointed out in the early 17th century, our senses can deceive us. Ultimately, this led him to argue for a rational foundation for what we might consider knowledge. That granted, it does not imply that a radical rationalist like Descartes does not believe in God. For example, Descartes reasoned that human beings are engulfed by their own imperfection, and that due to their debilitating imperfection humans could not possibly have imagined and created the idea of a perfect God. Therefore, since we cannot be the source of this idea, it must have come to us from another source, namely, that which is perfect, God. He deducts from this conclusion that he can know he exists because a perfect God would not deceive humans by supplying them with such thinking faculties if those capacities were not real.

If our rational mind is the source of knowledge, without any connection to observations of the world, then where do the fundamental relationships come from that our minds use in the reasoning process, e.g., cause and effect, or mathematical relations? Are we born with some “innate” concepts like the notion that for every event there is a cause? Could it be that humans are simply born with a concept of something beyond the immediately evident, a supernatural, divine, or transcendent realm, even of God?

On the other hand, there are epistemologists, people like John Locke or David Hume, who counter the rationalists’ claims for the mind and point toward the senses, a view known as empiricism. In this case, knowledge is *a posteriori*, by which they mean knowledge acquired through induction, by observation and verification, coming only after the employment of our senses. This may seem like the “common sense” view given that it fits so well with our everyday experience. But might there be a difference between things as they “really” are and as we perceive them to be? How can we possibly say that we have knowledge of the world around us if it is true that our experience of something can be different from the thing itself? How can we say we “know” an object in itself, as it really is, if the supposed “objective” reality is indistinguishable from our subjective experience of it? In other words, is there really any correspondence between our experience of an object and the object itself?

For Locke and other empiricists, things, objects exist independently from us, outside each individual. These objects are independent of our perceptions of them. However, Locke was clear that he understood the problem, saying that what he means when referring to our knowledge of things is merely our knowledge of our own ideas of things. So, objects can be measured, weighed, transcribed, but other characteristics like our perception of color is not inherent to the object, but are aspects of our biological reactions to what the object projects. Even more skeptical than Locke, David Hume argues that we cannot have certain knowledge of anything. How then, in Hume’s view, can we be certain that anything exists, ourselves, our universe—it is all ultimately unknowable?

What about religion and epistemology? Many religions teach their followers that the ideas, concepts, and practices they have been taught have been reliably received from a higher realm through direct revelation to the community’s founder or leaders. The problem remains: “How do we know that the information we received from the founder/leader is true or reliable?

The excerpt below deals with a simplification of the sources of what we think we know religiously. It comes from a tiny but powerful book written by Sigmund Freud in 1927 called *The Future of an Illusion*.[[1]](#footnote-1) In chapter 5, Freud begins to touch on the epistemological; we shall print a large portion of this argument below:

All teachings like these [the things we are taught in school], then, demand belief in their contents, but not without producing grounds for their claim. They are put forward as the epitomized result of a longer process of thought based on observation and certainly also on inferences. If anyone wants to go through this process himself instead of accepting its result, they show him how to set about it. Moreover, we are always in addition given the source of the knowledge conveyed by them, where that source is not self-evident, as it is in the case of geographical assertions. For instance, the earth is shaped like a sphere, the proofs adduced for this are Foucault’s pendulum experiment, the behavior of the horizon and the possibility of circumnavigating the earth. Since it is impracticable, as everyone concerned realizes, to send every schoolchild on a voyage round the world, we are satisfied with the letting what is taught at school be taken on trust; but we know that the path to acquiring a personal conviction remains open.
Let us try to apply the same test to the teachings of religion. When one is ask on what their claim to be believed is founded, we are met with three answers, which harmonize remarkably badly with one another. Firstly, these teachings deserve to be believed because they were already believed by our primal ancestors; secondly, we possess proofs which have been handed down to us from those same primeval times; and thirdly, it is forbidden to raise the question of their authentication at all.
This third point is bound to rouse our strongest suspicions. After all, a prohibition like this can only be for one reason—that society is very well aware of the insecurity of the claim it makes on behalf of its religious doctrines. Otherwise it would certainly be very ready to put the necessary data at the disposal of anyone who wanted to arrive at conviction. This being so, it is with a feeling of mistrust which it is hard to allay that we pass on to an examination of the other two grounds of proof. We ought to believe our forefathers believed. But these ancestors of ours were far more ignorant than we are. They believed in things we could not possibly accept today; and the possibility occurs to us that the doctrines of religion may belong to that class too. The proofs they have left us are set down in writings which themselves bear every mark of untrustworthiness. They are full of contradictions, revisions and falsifications, and where they speak of factual confirmations they are themselves unconfirmed. It does not help much to have if asserted that their wording, or even their context only, originates from divine revelation; for this assertion is itself one of the doctrines whose authenticity is under examination, and no proposition can be a proof of itself. Thus we arrive at the singular conclusion that of all the information proceeded by our cultural assets it is precisely the elements which might be of the greatest importance to us and which have the task of solving the riddles of the universe and or reconciling us to the sufferings of life—it is precisely those elements that are the least well authenticated of any.

Freud’s categories may seem limited and simplistic, but if we think about it, how many types of inherited traditions do we assume without question? These assumptions are so deeply embedded in our consciousness, in our relationships with others, and in the way we interact with the world as we experience it that stepping back to gain some level of critical distance is almost impossible.

Let us take a specific example of one of the ways religious people claim to have received “knowledge,” namely, something called revelation. Most people have heard of the Christian book of Revelation in the New Testament, but most people would understand revelation better in the form of “prophecy” and the work of so-called “prophets.” In many religions revelation is claimed as the foundation. Most Americans would understand this in terms of the revelations that stand at the beginning of the three major religions born in the Middle East, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These revelations are best known in their written forms, the Tanak (the Hebrew Scriptures) for Jews, the Bible (containing both the Jewish scriptures and the New Testament) for Christians, and the Qur’an for Muslims.

From the perspective of epistemology, the fundamental problem with associating these revelations with knowledge is not only the problems mentioned by Freud in our excerpt, but also the problem of the source of the supposed knowledge. Ultimately, and in most cases, the reception of special, usually divine, revelation is the claim of a single individual. And were it not for that individual’s ability to convince at least one other person of the truth of the claim nothing would follow from the claim. The ability to convince another to accept an individual’s claim to divine revelation is all around us. We see it on social media, in the rise of new religious movements, and in the very existence of the massive religious institutions that not only shape our society, but have endured for centuries. The conviction is often the result of demonstrations of supernatural powers (healing miracles, ecstatic phenomena, etc.), solving immediate social problems faced by a particular group (oppression, discrimination, loss of hope), or the appearance of successfully predicting future events. However, the prophet motivates other individuals to accept the revelation, in terms of the definition and nature of knowledge it is difficult to say whether we have access to knowledge as we have described it when the content in question comes to us only through one person’s claim to a revelatory experience, and especially when we have inherited that claim from ancient tradition.

1. The Standard Edition, trans. James Strachey, with a Biographical Introduction, by Peter Gay (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961, original German, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)