

considered knowledge. Descartes first presents what appears to be a very skeptical position but then uses this to defend the rationalist view of knowledge. Berkeley puts forth the idealist (immaterialist) position and Locke the empiricist position. Russell illustrates problems with all “epistemological frameworks,” and Code accounts for the subjective nature of knowledge and applies that to a feminist framework.

Theaetetus

Plato

(For a brief biography of Plato, see the first selection featuring him in the prologue.)

In the following selection, Socrates and Theaetetus discuss the criteria necessary for claiming knowledge. What Socrates aims to do here is to discover exactly what is needed in order to attain knowledge. He is especially careful to avoid relying only on notions of *truth* and *belief*, as many people believe true things for the wrong reason.

Reading Questions

1. Briefly explain the three criteria required for knowledge according to Socrates.
2. Why does Socrates add the term “account” to “true belief” for his criteria for knowledge?
3. What are the three meanings for “account” that Socrates suggests?
4. What is the purpose of the discussion about the wagon?

SOCR: . . . What is one to say that knowledge is? For surely we are not going to give up yet.

THEAET: Not unless you do so.

SOCR: Then tell me: what definition can we give with the least risk of contradicting ourselves?

THEAET: The one we tried before, Socrates. I have nothing else to suggest.

SOCR: What was that?

THEAET: That true belief is knowledge. Surely there can at least be no mistake in believing what is true and the consequences are always satisfactory.

SOCR: Try, and you will see, Theaetetus, as the man said when he was asked if the river was too deep to ford. So here, if we go forward on our search, we may stumble upon something that will reveal the thing we are looking for. We shall make nothing but, if we stay where we are.

THEAET: True; let us go forward and see.

SOCR: Well, we need not go far to see this much: You will find a whole profession to prove that true belief is not knowledge.

THEAET: How so? What profession?

SOCR: The profession of those paragons of intellect known as orators and lawyers. There you have men who use their skill to produce conviction, not by instruction, but by making people believe whatever they want them to believe. You can hardly imagine teachers so clever as to be able, in the short time allowed by the clock, to instruct their hearers thoroughly in the

true facts of a case of robbery or other violence which those hearers had not witnessed.

THEAET: No, I cannot imagine that; but they can convince them.

SOCR: And by convincing you mean making them believe something.

THEAET: Of course.

SOCR: And when a jury is rightly convinced of facts which can be known only by an eye-witness, then, judging by hearsay and accepting a true belief, they are judging without knowledge, although, if they find the right verdict, their conviction is correct?

THEAET: Certainly.

SOCR: But if true belief and knowledge were the same thing, the best of jurymen should never have a correct belief without knowledge. It now appears that they must be different things.

THEAET: Yes, Socrates, I have heard someone make the distinction. I had forgotten, now it comes back to me. He said that true belief with the addition of an account (*logos*) was knowledge, while belief without an account was outside its range. Where no account could be given of a thing, it was not "knowable"—that was the word he used—where it could, it was knowable.

SOCR: Well then, what is this term "account" intended to convey to us? I think it must mean one of three things.

THEAET: What are they?

SOCR: The first will be giving overt expression to one's thought by means of vocal sound with names and verbs, casting an image of one's notion on the stream that flows through the lips, like a reflection in a mirror or in water. Do you agree that expression of that sort is an "account"?

THEAET: I do. We certainly call that expressing ourselves in speech.

SOCR: On the other hand, that is a thing that anyone can do more or less readily. If a man is not born deaf or dumb, he can signify what he thinks on any subject. So in this sense anyone whatever who has a correct notion evidently will have it "with an account," and there will be no place left anywhere for a correct notion apart from knowledge.

THEAET: True.

SOCR: Then we must not be too ready to charge the author of the definition of knowledge now before us with talking nonsense. Perhaps that is not what he meant. He may have meant: being able to reply to the question, what any given thing is, by enumerating its elements.

THEAET: For example, Socrates?

SOCR: For example, Hesiod says about a wagon, "In a wagon are a hundred pieces of wood." I could not name them all; no more, I imagine, could you. If we were asked what a wagon is, we should be content if we could mention wheels, axle, body, rails, yoke.

THEAET: Certainly.

SOCR: But I dare say he would think us just as ridiculous as if we replied to the question about your own name by telling the syllables. We might think and express ourselves correctly, but we should be absurd if we fancied ourselves to

be grammarians and able to give such an account of the name Theaetetus as a grammarian would offer. He would say it is impossible to give a scientific account of anything, short of adding to your true notion a complete catalogue of the elements, as, I think, was said earlier.

THEAET: Yes, it was.

SOCR: In the same way, he would say, we may have a correct notion of the wagon, but the man who can give a complete statement of its nature by going through those hundred parts has thereby added an account to his correct notion and, in place of mere belief, has arrived at a technical knowledge of the wagon's nature, by going through all the elements in the whole.

THEAET: Don't you approve, Socrates?

SOCR: Tell me if you approve, my friend, and whether you accept the view that the complete enumeration of elements is an account of any given thing, whereas description in terms of syllables or of any larger unit still leaves it unaccounted for. Then we can look into the matter further.

THEAET: Well, I do accept that.

SOCR: Do you think, then, that anyone has knowledge of whatever it may be, when he thinks that one and the same thing is a part sometimes of one thing, sometimes of a different thing; or again when he believes now one and now another thing to be part of one and the same thing?

THEAET: Certainly not.

SOCR: Have you forgotten, then, that when you first began learning to read and write, that was what you and your schoolfellows did?

THEAET: Do you mean, when we thought that now one letter and now another was part of the same syllable, and when we put the same letter sometimes into the proper syllable, sometimes into another?

SOCR: That is what I mean.

THEAET: Then I have certainly not forgotten; and I do not think that one has reached knowledge so long as one is in that condition.

SOCR: Well then, if at that stage you are writing "Theaetetus" and you think you taught to write T and H and E and do so, and again when you are trying to write "Theodorus", you think you ought to write T and E and do so, can we say that you now the first syllable of your two names?

THEAET: No; we have just agreed that one has not knowledge so long as one is in that condition.

SOCR: And there is no reason why a person should not be in the same condition with respect to the second, third, and fourth syllables as well?

THEAET: None whatever.

SOCR: Can we, then, say that whenever in writing "Theaetetus" he puts down all the letters in order, then he is in possession of the complete catalogue of elements together with correct belief?

THEAET: Obviously.

SOCR: Being still, as we agree, without knowledge, though his beliefs are correct?

THEAET: Yes.

SOCR: Although he possesses the "account" in addition to right belief. For when he wrote he was in possession of the catalogue of the elements, which we agreed was the "account."

THEAET: True.

SOCR: So, my friend, there is such a thing as right belief together with an account, which is not yet entitled to be called knowledge.

THEAET: I am afraid so.

SOCR: Then, apparently, our idea that we had found the perfectly true definition of knowledge was no better than a golden dream. Or shall we not condemn the theory yet? Perhaps the meaning to be given to "account" is not this, but the remaining one of the three, one of which we said must be intended by anyone who defines knowledge as correct belief together with an account.

THEAET: A good remainder; there is still one meaning left. The first was what might called the image of thought in spoken sound; and the one we have just discussed going all through the elements to arrive at the whole. What is the third?

SOCR: The meaning most people would give: being able to name some mark by which the thing one is asked about differs from everything else.

THEAET: Could you give me an example of such an account of a thing?

SOCR: Take the sun as an example. I dare say you will be satisfied with the account of it as the brightest of the heavenly bodies that go round the earth.

THEAET: Certainly.

SOCR: Let me explain the point of this example. It is to illustrate what we were just saying: That if you get hold of the difference distinguishing any given thing from all others, then, so some people say, you will have an "account" of it; whereas, so long as you fix upon something common to other things, your account will embrace all the things that share it.

THEAET: I understand. I agree that what you describe may fairly be called an "account".

SOCR: And if, besides a right notion about a thing, whatever it may be, you also grasp its difference from all other things, you will have arrived at knowledge of what, till then, you had only a notion of.

THEAET: We do say that, certainly.

SOCR: Really, Theaetetus, now I come to look at this statement at close quarters, it is like a scene-painting: I cannot make it out at all, though, so long as I kept at a distance, there seemed to be some sense in it.

THEAET: What do you mean? Why so?

SOCR: I will explain, if I can. Suppose I have a correct notion about you; if I add to that the account of you, then, we are to understand, I know you. Otherwise I have only a notion.

THEAET: Yes.

SOCR: And "account" means putting your differentness into words.

THEAET: Yes.

SOCR: So, at the time when I had only a notion, my mind did not grasp any of the points in which you differ from others?

THEAET: Apparently not.

SOCR: Then I must have had before my mind one of those common things which belong to another person as much as to you.

THEAET: That follows.

SOCR: But look here! If that was so, how could I possibly be having a notion of you rather than of anyone else? Suppose I was thinking: Theaetetus is one who is a man and has a nose and eyes and a mouth and so forth, enumerating every part of the body. Will thinking in that way result in my thinking of Theaetetus rather than of Theodorus or, as they say, of the man in the street?

THEAET: How should it?

SOCR: Well, now suppose I think not merely of a man with a nose and eyes, but of one with a snub nose and prominent eyes, once more shall I be having a notion of you any more than of myself or anyone else of that description?

THEAET: No.

SOCR: In fact, there will be no notion of Theaetetus in my mind, I suppose, until this particular snubness has stamped and registered within me a record distinct from all the other cases of snubness that I have seen; and so with every other part of you. Then, if I meet you tomorrow, that trait will revive my memory and give me a correct notion about you.

THEAET: Quite true.

SOCR: If that is so, the correct notion of anything must itself include the differentness of that thing.

THEAET: Evidently.

SOCR: Then what meaning is left for getting hold of an "account" in addition to the correct notion? If, on the one hand, it means adding the notion of how a thing differs from other things, such an injunction is simply absurd.

THEAET: How so?

SOCR: When we have a correct notion of the way in which certain things differ from other things, it tells us to add a correct notion of the way in which they differ from other things. On this showing, the most vicious of circles would be nothing to this injunction. It might better deserve to be called the sort of direction a blind man might give: To tell us to get hold of something we already have, in order to get to know something we are already thinking of, suggests a state of the most absolute darkness.

THEAET: Whereas, if ———? The supposition you made just now implied that you would state some alternative: what was it?

SOCR: If the direction to add an "account" means that we are to get to *know* the differentness, as opposed to merely having a notion of it, this most admirable of all definitions of knowledge will be a pretty business; because "getting to know" means acquiring knowledge, doesn't it?

THEAET: Yes.

SOCR: So, apparently, to the question, What is knowledge? our definition will reply "Correct belief together with knowledge of a differentness"; for, according to it, "adding an account" will come to that.

THEAET: So it seems.

SOCR: Yes; and when we are inquiring after the nature of knowledge, nothing could be sillier than to say that it is correct belief together with a *knowledge* of differentness or of anything whatever.

So, Theaetetus, neither true belief, nor the addition of an “account” to true belief can be knowledge.

THEAET: Apparently not.

SOCR: Are we in labour, then, with any further child, my friend, or have we brought to birth all we have to say about knowledge?

THEAET: Indeed we have; and for my part I have already, thanks to you, given utterance to more than I had in me.

SOCR: All of which our midwife’s skill pronounces to be mere wind-eggs and not worth the rearing?

THEAET: Undoubtedly.

SOCR: Then supposing you should ever henceforth try to conceive afresh. Theaetetus, if you succeed, your embryo thoughts will be the better as a consequence of today’s scrutiny; and if you remain barren, you will be gentler and more agreeable to your companions, having the good sense not to fancy you know what you do not know. For that, and no more, is all that my art can effect; nor have I any of that knowledge possessed by all the great and admirable men of our own day or of the past. But this midwife’s art is a gift from heaven; my mother had it for women, and I for young men of a generous spirit and for all in whom beauty dwells.

Discussion Questions

1. Think of statements that you claim to know. How are you justified in knowing them? What about:
 - a. I know where my bike/car is parked.
 - b. I know the Earth is spherical.
 - c. I know God exists (or, I know God does not exist).
 - d. I know all ravens are black.
 - e. I know aliens exist (or, I know aliens do not exist).
2. In the movie *Thank You for Smoking*, the main character seems more interested in creating a certain belief versus a “true” belief. He is very skilled in *rhetoric*: the ability to persuade. Socrates seems to denounce this when he mentions orators and lawyers. How can you go about distinguishing mere rhetoric from a more justified account of the truth? Should advertisers and lawyers have the responsibility of promoting the truth or should it be the listener’s responsibility to be able to sift through the rhetoric?
3. Would you rather be more skilled in rhetoric—convincing others to believe your stance—or more skilled in knowledge-gathering and coming to know the truth, despite what others believe? Why?
4. If you find the truth and believe it but do so in an unjustified way, does that matter? If one believes that Zeus throws lightning bolts when he’s angry and this helps them to predict when and how lightning occurs and it provides a sense of comfort, what value would you place on this?
5. What would it take to justify your knowing whether aliens do not exist?

Meditations I and II

René Descartes

Like many philosophers of his time, Descartes explored the sciences as well as philosophy. He published *The Meditations* in 1641 in French for a mass audience: They were meant to be read by everyone, not just philosophers and theologians, and were literally meant as a sort of meditation that non-philosophers could do. Considered one of the most influential philosophers throughout history, Descartes helped to add credence to the *dualist* position—that there exist two separate types of “substances” in the world: the material (such as our bodies and things that occupy space) and the mental (such as our minds and souls).

Descartes hopes to overcome the skeptic challenge that absolute knowledge is impossible, though throughout the first meditation he appears quite skeptical. Eventually, by the end of the sixth and final meditation, Descartes not only demonstrates that knowledge is possible, but helps to define just what we can know, including (not in this section) knowledge of an immaterial soul and the existence of an all-good God.

Reading Questions

1. Descartes explains many ways in which it seems that knowledge may not be possible—what are they?
2. How does he eventually overturn the skeptical position and prove that absolute knowledge is possible?

Meditation I

Of the Things Which May Be Brought Within the Sphere of the Doubtful

It is now some years since I detected how many were the false beliefs that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the sciences. But as this enterprise appeared to be a very great one, I waited until I had attained an age so mature that I could not hope that at any later date I should be better fitted to execute my design. This reason caused me to delay so long that I should feel that I was doing wrong were I to occupy in deliberation the time that yet remains to me for action. Today, then, since very opportunely for the plan I have in view I have delivered my mind from every care [and am happily agitated by no passions] and since I have procured for myself an assured leisure in a peaceable retirement. I shall at last seriously and freely address myself to the general upheaval of all my former opinions.

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