

# WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED KNOWLEDGE?

DUNCAN PRITCHARD

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*'... a valuable addition ... a book that sets things out in a clear and elementary way, while still covering the ground properly.'*

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**What is knowledge? Where does it come from?**

**Can we know anything at all?**

This lucid and engaging introduction grapples with these central questions in the theory of knowledge, offering a clear, non-partisan view of the main themes of epistemology, including recent developments such as virtue epistemology and contextualism.

Duncan Pritchard discusses both traditional issues and contemporary ideas in thirteen easily digestible sections which include:

- The value of knowledge
- The structure of knowledge
- Virtues and faculties
- Perception
- Testimony and memory
- Induction
- Scepticism

*What is this thing called knowledge?* contains many helpful student-friendly features. Each chapter concludes with a useful summary of the main ideas discussed, study questions, annotated further reading, and a guide to web resources. Text-boxes provide bite-sized summaries of key concepts and major philosophers, and clear and interesting examples are used throughout, whilst a helpful glossary explains important terms. This is an ideal first textbook in the theory of knowledge for undergraduates taking a first course in philosophy.

**Duncan Pritchard** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Stirling, UK. He is the author of *Epistemic Luck* and the co-author of *Epistemology A-Z*.



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DUNCAN PRITCHARD

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*For Mandi, Ethan and Alexander*



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# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book has been designed to make it as user-friendly as possible, so that it can guide you through the theory of knowledge with the minimum fuss. It is composed of thirteen short chapters which fall into three main sections.

The first part explores general topics in the theory of knowledge, and asks questions about, for example, what the value of knowledge is (*who cares who knows?*). The second part looks at where our knowledge comes from, and considers the role of, for instance, perception and memory in helping us to acquire, and retain, knowledge. The third part examines the scope of our knowledge, and to that end considers sceptical arguments which purport to show that the possession of knowledge – or at least the possession of certain kinds of knowledge at any rate – is impossible.

Each chapter closes with a summary of the main points made in that chapter and some questions for discussion. There is also a section recommending additional readings for those who wish to explore the topic discussed in that chapter further, and a list of useful internet resources. (If you want some general further reading on the theory of knowledge as a whole, then there is a section towards the back of the book.) Within each chapter you'll find text boxes which give further information relevant to what is being discussed in the main text, such as more information about a historical figure who has been mentioned.

Although terminology is avoided where possible, you don't need to worry if you come across a technical word that you don't understand, since all terminology is explained at the back of the book in a glossary (technical words that have corresponding entries in the glossary are identified in the text by being in **bold** at first mention).

Finally, at the very end of the book, there is an index.



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**WHAT IS  
KNOWLEDGE?**

**PART**  
*I*



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# 1 SOME PRELIMINARIES

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## TYPES OF KNOWLEDGE

Think of all the things that you know, or at least *think* you know, right now. You know, for example, that the earth is round and that Paris is the capital of France. You know that you can speak (or at least read) English, and that two plus two is equal to four. You know, presumably, that all bachelors are unmarried men, that it is wrong to hurt people just for fun, that *The Godfather* is a wonderful film, and that water has the chemical structure H<sub>2</sub>O. And so on.

But what is it that all these cases of knowledge have in common? Think again of the examples just given, which include geographical, linguistic, mathematical, aesthetic, ethical, and scientific knowledge. Given these myriad types of knowledge, what, if anything, ties them all together? It is this sort of question that is asked by those who study **epistemology**, which is the theory of knowledge. The goal of this book is to introduce you to this exciting field of philosophy. By the end of this book, you should be able to count yourself as an epistemologist.

In all the examples of knowledge just given, the type of knowledge in question is what is called **propositional knowledge**, in that it is knowledge of a **proposition**. A proposition is what is asserted by a sentence which says that something is the case – e.g., that the earth is flat, that bachelors are unmarried men, that two plus two is four, and so on. Propositional knowledge will be the focus of this book, but we should also recognise that it is not the only sort of knowledge that we possess.

There is, for example, **ability knowledge**, or *know-how*. Ability knowledge is clearly different from propositional knowledge; I know how to swim, for example, but I do not thereby know a set of propositions about how to swim. Indeed, I'm not altogether sure that I could tell you how to swim, but I do know how to swim nonetheless (and I could prove it by manifesting this ability – by jumping into a swimming pool and doing the breaststroke, say).

Ability knowledge is certainly an important type of knowledge to have. We want lots of know-how, such as to know how to ride a bicycle, to drive a car, or to operate a personal computer. Notice, however, that while only relatively sophisticated creatures like humans possess propositional knowledge, ability knowledge is far more common. An ant might plausibly be said to know how to navigate its terrain, but would we want to say that an ant has propositional knowledge; that there are facts which the ant knows? Could the ant know, for example, that the terrain it is presently crossing is someone's porch? Intuitively not, and this marks out the importance of propositional knowledge over other types of knowledge like ability knowledge, which is that such knowledge presupposes the sort of relatively sophisticated intellectual abilities possessed by humans.

## TWO BASIC REQUIREMENTS ON KNOWLEDGE: TRUTH AND BELIEF

Henceforth, when we talk about knowledge, we will have propositional knowledge in mind, unless explicitly stated otherwise. Two things that just about every epistemologist agrees on are that a prerequisite for possessing knowledge is that one has a belief in the relevant proposition, and that that belief must be true. So if you know that Paris is the capital of France, then you must believe that this is the case, and your belief must also be true.

Take the truth requirement first. In order to assess this claim, consider what would follow if we dropped this requirement. In particular, is it plausible to suppose that one could know a false proposition? Of course, we often think that we know something and then it turns out that we were wrong, but that's just to say that we didn't really know it in the first place. Could we genuinely know a false proposition? Could I know, for example, that the moon is made of cheese, even though it manifestly isn't? I take it that when we talk of someone having knowledge we mean to exclude such a possibility. This is because to ascribe knowledge to someone is to credit that person with the achievement of having got things right, and that means that what we regard that person as knowing had better not be false, but true.

Next, consider the belief requirement. Of course, it is sometimes the case that we explicitly *contrast* belief and knowledge, as when we say things like, 'I don't merely believe that he was innocent, I know it', which might on the face of it be thought to imply that knowledge does not require belief after all. If you think about these sorts of assertions in a little more detail, however, then it becomes clear that the contrast between belief and knowledge is being used here simply to emphasise the fact that one *not only* believes the proposition in question, but *also* knows it. In this way, these assertions actually lend support to the claim that knowledge requires belief, rather than undermining it.

As with the truth requirement, we will assess the plausibility of the belief requirement for knowledge by imagining for a moment that it doesn't hold, which would mean that one could have knowledge of a proposition which one did not even believe. Suppose, for example, that someone claimed to have known a quiz answer, even though it was clear from that person's behaviour at the time that she didn't believe the proposition in question (perhaps she put forward a different answer to the question, or no answer at all). Clearly we would not agree that this person did have knowledge in this case. Again, the reason for this relates to the fact that to say that someone has knowledge is to credit that person with a certain kind of achievement. But for it to be *your* achievement, then belief in the proposition in question is essential, since otherwise the correctness of the proposition, where it is correct, is of no credit to you at all.

### KNOWING VERSUS MERELY 'GETTING IT RIGHT'

It is often noted that belief *aims* at the truth, in the sense that when we believe a proposition, we believe it to be the case (i.e., to be true). When what we believe *is* true, then there is a match between what we think is the case and what is the case. We have got things right. If mere true belief suffices for 'getting things right', however, then one might wonder as to why epistemologists do not end their quest for an account of knowledge right there and simply hold that knowledge is nothing more than true belief – i.e., 'getting things right'.

There is in fact a very good reason why epistemologists do not rest content with mere true belief as an account of knowledge, and that is that one can have true belief entirely by *accident*, in which case it would be of no credit to you at all that you got things right. Consider Harry, who forms his belief that the horse Lucky Lass will win the next race purely on the basis of the fact that the name of the horse appeals to him. Clearly this is not a good basis on which to form one's belief about the winner of the next horse race, since whether or not a horse's name appeals to you has no bearing on its performance.

Suppose, however, that Harry's belief turns out to be true, in that Lucky Lass *does* win the next race. Is this knowledge? Intuitively not, since it is just a matter of *luck* that his belief was true in this case. Remember that knowledge is an achievement, something that one can take credit for, and yet one's genuine achievements are not purely a matter of luck.

In order to emphasise this point, think for a moment about achievements in another realm, such as archery. Notice that if one genuinely is a skilled archer, then if one tries to hit the bull's-eye, and the conditions are right (the wind is not gusting, for example), then one usually *will* hit the bull's-eye. That's just what it means to be a skilled archer. The word 'usually' is important here, since someone who isn't a skilled archer might, as it happens, hit the bull's eye on a particular occasion, but she wouldn't *usually* hit the bull's-eye in these conditions. Perhaps, for example, she aims her arrow and, by luck, it hits the centre of the target. Does the mere fact that she is successful on this one occasion mean that she is a skilled archer? No, and the reason is that she would not be able to repeat this success. If she tried again, for example, her arrow would in all likelihood sail off into the heavens.

Having knowledge is just like this. Imagine that one's belief is an arrow, which is aimed at the centre of the target, truth. Hitting the bull's-eye and forming a true belief suffices for getting things right, since all this means is that one was on that occasion successful. It does not suffice, however, for having knowledge any more than hitting the bull's-eye purely by chance indicates that you are skilled in archery. To have knowledge, one's success must genuinely be the result of one's efforts, rather than merely being by chance.

And this means that forming one's belief in the way that one does ought usually, in those circumstances, to lead to a true belief.

Harry, who forms his true belief that Lucky Lass will win the race simply because he likes the name, is like the person who happens to hit the bull's-eye, but who is not a skilled archer. Usually, forming one's belief about whether a horse will win a race simply by considering whether the name of the horse appeals to you will lead you to form a false belief.

Contrast Harry with someone who genuinely knows that the race will be won by Lucky Lass. Perhaps, for example, this person is a 'Mr Big', a gangster who has fixed the race by drugging the other animals so that his horse, Lucky Lass, will win. He knows that the race will be won by Lucky Lass because the way he has formed his belief, by basing it on the special grounds he has for thinking that Lucky Lass cannot lose, would normally lead him to have a true belief. It is not a matter of luck that Mr Big hits the target of truth.

The challenge for epistemologists is thus to explain what needs to be added to mere true belief in order to get knowledge. In particular, epistemologists need to explain what needs to be added to true belief to capture this idea that knowledge, unlike mere true belief, is a genuine achievement on the part of the agent, something that the agent can take credit for, where this means, for example, that the agent's belief was not simply a matter of luck.

As we will see, it is in fact surprisingly difficult to give an unproblematic account of knowledge which meets this requirement. This has led some commentators to be doubtful about the whole project of defining knowledge. Perhaps there just is nothing that ties all cases of knowledge together, or perhaps there is such an essence to knowledge, but it is so complex that it is a futile task to seek an account of it.

In this book, however, we will proceed with optimism on this score. Even if an unproblematic definition of knowledge is unavailable, there are a number of plausible accounts on offer, even though none of them is entirely uncontentious. Moreover, the very practice of evaluating these different views about knowledge itself casts light upon what knowledge is, even if it does not result in a neat definition of this notion.

In any case, while the project of elucidating knowledge is central to epistemology (it is the principal focus of Chapters 1–6), it is important not to overstate its importance. As this book testifies, there is more to epistemology than the quest to define knowledge. One can examine the different ways in which knowledge is acquired and retained, for example, such as via our perceptual faculty of sight and our faculty of memory (see Chapters 7–10 on the ways in which knowledge is acquired and retained). Furthermore, there are sceptical challenges to be engaged with, challenges which purport to show that knowledge is impossible to possess *however* we define it (Chapters 11–13 deal with sceptical challenges and related issues).

### A BRIEF REMARK ON TRUTH

I want to end this chapter by commenting a little more on truth (note that I'll be saying more about truth at the end of the book). After all, the reader might be tempted to observe that it is odd that we have taken our understanding of truth as given and gone straight ahead to examine knowledge. Do we really have a better grip on what truth is than on what knowledge is?

It is true (if you'll forgive the pun) that I'm taking a certain commonsense conception of truth for granted here. In particular, I'm going to assume that truth is *objective* in the following sense: at least for most propositions at any rate, your thinking that they are true does not make them true. Whether or not the world is round, for example, has nothing to do with whether or not we think that it is, but simply depends upon the shape of the earth.

Most of us uncritically take this conception of truth as obvious, but there are some philosophers who think that this view of truth is unsustainable. I think that their reasons for rejecting this account of truth rest on a number of interrelated mistakes, and when I return to this issue at the end of the book I will explain what some of the core mistakes are. For now, however, it is enough that this conception of truth is intuitive. If you also think that it is intuitive, then that is all to the good. If, on the other hand, you don't, then I urge you to set this matter to one side until later on.

### CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. One of the characteristic questions of epistemology concerns what all the myriad kinds of knowledge we ascribe to ourselves have in common: *What is knowledge?*
- We can distinguish between knowledge of propositions, or propositional knowledge, and know-how, or ability knowledge. Intuitively, the former demands a greater degree of intellectual sophistication on the part of the knower than the latter. Our focus in this book will be on propositional knowledge.
- In order to have knowledge of a proposition, that proposition must be true, and one must believe it.
- Mere true belief does not suffice for knowledge, however, since one can gain mere true belief purely by chance, and yet you cannot gain knowledge purely by chance.
- In this book I will be assuming a commonsense objective view of truth which holds that (for the most part at least) merely thinking that something is true does not make it true.

## STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 Give examples of your own of the following types of knowledge:
  - scientific knowledge;
  - geographical knowledge;
  - historical knowledge;
  - religious knowledge.
- 2 Explain in your own words what the difference between ability knowledge and propositional knowledge is, and give two examples of each.
- 3 Why is mere true belief not sufficient for knowledge? Give an example of your own of a case in which an agent truly believes something, but does not know it.
- 4 Think about the 'objective' and 'commonsense' view of truth that I described at the end of this chapter. Is this view of truth a matter of common sense to you? If so, then try to formulate some reasons that someone might offer in order to call it into question. If, on the other hand, it is not matter of common sense as far as you are concerned, then try to explain what you think is wrong with this view of truth.

## ANNOTATED FURTHER READING

- Blackburn, Simon (2005) *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane).  
A very readable introduction to the issues as regards the philosophy of truth. This is a good place to start if you want to learn more about this topic.
- Lynch, Michael (2005) *True to Life: Why Truth Matters* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).  
A very readable introduction to the issues as regards the philosophy of truth.
- Pritchard, Duncan (2005) *Epistemic Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). A recent in-depth discussion of the idea that knowledge is incompatible with luck.
- Ryle, Gilbert (1949/2002) *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press).  
This is the classic discussion of ability knowledge, in contrast to propositional knowledge (see especially §2).

## INTERNET RESOURCES

- Steup, Matthias (2005) 'The Analysis of Knowledge', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/>>. Read up to §1.2 for more on the basic requirements on knowledge.



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# 2 THE VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

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| • The instrumental value of true belief     | 12 |
| • The value of knowledge                    | 13 |
| • The statues of Daedalus                   | 15 |
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