

Introduction – the problem of knowledge

We live in a world which is strange and confusing and we are confronted with contradictory beliefs and different opinions. Knowledge is not static but has a history and changes over time. Yesterday's revolution in thought becomes today's common sense, and today's common sense may go on to become tomorrow's superstition. So what guarantee is there that our current understanding of things is correct? Despite the intellectual progress of the last five hundred years, future generations may look back on our achievements and dismiss our science as crude, our arts as naive and our ethics as barbaric.

Most people do not think that there is a problem of knowledge and they see knowledge as nothing more than organized common sense. While there may be something to be said for this view the trouble is that much of what passes for common sense consists of little more than untested beliefs that are based on such things as prejudice and blind appeals to authority. Moreover, many things that at first seem obvious to common sense become less and less obvious the closer you look at them.

When you know something that you are certain it is true you don't have doubts about it. But when you merely believe it you may think it is true but you are not certain. Certainty is what distinguishes knowledge from belief. At first sight it may be reasonable enough. But when you start to look critically at the things we normally claim to know you may begin to wonder if any of them are completely certain.

Sometimes people react to this problem of certainty and they take opposite extreme position known as relativism. According to relativism, there is no such thing as absolute truth that exists in an objective way independent of what anyone happens to believe is true. Truth is relative and may be different for different individuals or for different cultures.

Then we must therefore conclude that one and the same knowledge claim can be true for me and false for you!??

The fact is that you believe that something is true doesn't mean that it actually is true. The fact that we take seriously the idea that someone might be wrong in their beliefs suggests that relativism is false. The statement "All truth is relative" is self-contradictory.

Since we live in a world in which there are few black and white certainties, we have to rely more on judgement. An important aspect of good judgement is finding the right balance between skepticism and open-mindedness.

Two preliminary criteria for deciding whether a knowledge claim is plausible are evidence and coherence.

Since we are what we believe and our beliefs affect our actions, if we want to be authentic and responsible we should occasionally subject our beliefs to critical examination. Philosopher Socrates (470 – 399 BCE) once said that “The unexamined life is not worth living”.

“What men really want is not knowledge but certainty.”

Bertrand Russell, 1872 – 1970

“All men have opinions, but few think.”

George Berkeley, 1685 – 1753

“To know one’s ignorance is the best part of knowledge.”

Lao Tse, 565 BCE

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