



Editorial

The Edge of Knowledge

Epistemology is the mining boss of philosophy. It digs deep into the foundations even of philosophy itself. The word means *the study of knowledge* (from the Greek *episteme* meaning 'knowledge' or 'belief', or in some circles, 'faith'.) Its question is, *How can we be sure about anything?*

René Descartes asked this question in its most radical form when he said: if a powerful, evil demon set out to mislead us about *everything*, then how could we tell? If we couldn't tell, how do we know that there really isn't such a demon?

Less generally, how can you ever credibly claim to know something before you can say *how* you know it? Put this way, it's not hard to see that epistemology is at the base of science, philosophy, religion and many other areas of human endeavour. But the ways we know things may differ from field to field.

How do we know when a theory is scientifically valid? Here, what we want to know is whether it is an accurate description of the world, within its limits. The methodology of science is to compare the theory with whatever it is that the theory is about, then refine the theory as necessary until it gives a description consistent with what is observed. (As to which theories are scientific, a set of possible criteria is proposed by Russell Berg on p.14.) Science is about the observed world. The principle of how we know something to be true in science is, *we know this is the way the observed world behaves because this is how it may best (ideally, incontrovertibly) be observed to behave.*

Maths proofs are good for maths. In an attempt to uncover a general pattern for knowledge, perhaps we could redescribe the process of mathematical discovery so that it too could be thought of as comparing a theory to what that theory is about. Here the *evidence* for the conclusion would be the steps it takes to get there. Similarly for arguments of logical symbolism: the evidence would be the steps in the argument. Thus what counts as evidence would be different for different domains, evidently. (Philosophy doesn't count as purely logical, because as soon as signs are used as language, possible meanings for each sign multiply exponentially. Peter Rickman argues on p.6 that psychology cannot be considered science for this precise reason.)

Aside from the incontrovertible parts of science, maths and logic, can any other way of thinking strictly be called 'knowledge' – that is, yielding *an assurance of truth*? Could there be ways to what might rightly be called *knowledge* concerning religious experience, emotional intuitions, philosophical ideas too? Why/why not? (*And which way?* Kile Jones reports on the split between analytical and continental philosophy in thought and method on p.8.) To say that 'religious experience' for instance is inadmissible as evidence begs the question of what is admissible.

However, the enquirer should also ask why and which religious experience is admissible. Why trust *this* type? The unflinching claim to know something without the willingness (or ability) to respectably say how, is the most philosopher-baiting aspect of dogmatism. The core impulse of reason, the demand for understanding, requires openness to all questions, *especially* concerning how ideological claims to knowledge are justified, because of the significant implications of these claims. On the other hand, a sceptic's lack of imagination is not necessarily the same as a discernment of truth. We look at religious knowledge-claims from both sides in the book reviews section of this issue.

Even if in the less provable areas we can't have what could strictly be called knowledge, in the sense of 'incontrovertible assurance', so what? Doesn't the question of what to believe in these situations simply soften into 'What's the most reasonable thing to believe?' This will not satisfy the truly paranoid Cartesian, but scepticism to the extent that we can't trust anything we can't incontrovertibly demonstrate, is only really useful as an exercise in delimiting the borders of certainty. Nevertheless, it's a paradox of philosophy, or at least an irritation, that you can't often *prove* philosophical views; you can only give your best reasons to support them – and these are only the reasons you're prepared to settle for... On the bright side the acknowledgement of fallibility can have a moderating effect on the passions of zealotry. As with anything, the claims of any religion are only as justified as the best reasons to believe they're true – yet a wider appreciation of this fact this might just take the edge off the absolute justification of idiotic and barbaric acts in the name of The Truth.

The value of a good philosophy of knowledge can be seen in all the fruits of science. Thus, contrary to Descartes' mental quicksand, and in the face of the fears of all who do not trust questioning – who fear their belief-systems might be undermined by too many questions – we can view the epistemological mission as benevolent: to increase the stock, strength and detail of our most reasonable beliefs by providing them with the strongest foundation of justification possible; and perhaps to open up new ways of knowing. Engaging the epistemological understanding which is the touchstone of scientific research was like stepping into a hidden grotto universe. Who knows what knowledge is possible if we find equally good ways of knowing for other areas of enquiry too?

Grant Bartley is Assistant Editor of Philosophy Now. His book The Metarevolution is available as a free download from philosophynow.org. Scroll down to 'About Us', then click the link.