

KNOWLEDGE, CERTAINTY AND SCEPTICISM

(Note for Kingston Philosophy Café discussion on 7 October 2014)

We are deemed to *know* something only if three conditions are met.¹

1. It is *true*.
2. We are *certain* of it (to say “I know but I might be wrong” is contradictory).
3. Our certainty is *justified*.

For example, I know it is raining outside only if it is raining outside, I am sure of it and have just cause to be sure.

We may be certain of something that is true but nevertheless not *know* it. For example, if asked the whereabouts of a scarf I might assert correctly and with absolute conviction “It’s in the drawer”, but only because that’s where it’s normally kept. If, however, the basis for my assertion is that I remember putting it there a few minutes ago then my claim to knowledge would seem justified. Acceptance of a claim to knowledge thus depends upon a judgement about what constitutes a valid basis for certainty i.e. whether the claimant is in a *position to know*.²

The possibility of knowledge, as defined above, depends upon the possibility of being *certain* about anything. In many cases the evidence of our senses seems all that is needed. To ask “how do I know it’s raining?”, when I’m standing outside in the pouring rain getting soaking wet, would appear mad. Sometimes, however, we draw incorrect conclusions from available evidence. Sitting indoors and seeing drops of water on the window pane, I might feel certain that it’s raining outside only to discover later that the drops come from a misdirected lawn sprinkler.

When we do not feel entirely sure about something we tend to ‘hedge our bets’ by saying, for example, that we *think* we know or that we are only a given *percentage* certain. But are we ever in a position to be *100 per cent* certain about anything? In practice, can we at best establish only what is *very probably* true?

Famously, the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) rejected as false anything of which he could have the least doubt “in order to see if I was left with anything that was entirely indubitable” [a]. He discounted in turn:

- the evidence of his senses, because “our senses sometimes deceive us”
- the products of reasoning and logic, because we can “make mistakes in reasoning and commit logical fallacies”
- anything ever entering his mind, because “the very thoughts we have while awake may also occur while we are asleep” and be “no truer than the illusions of my dreams”.

The one thing he found he could *not* doubt was that, in order to doubt, he must exist as a *thinking* thing. “I noticed that while I was trying in this way to think that everything was false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth ‘*I am thinking, therefore I exist*’ was so firm and sure that even the most extravagant supposition of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking”. Because ‘thinking’ can be evidenced in a variety of ways, Descartes regarded himself as not just “a thing that thinks” but also “a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions” [b]. With regard to his sensory experience, he might doubt whether the things he perceived really existed but not that he *seemed* to perceive them. “This cannot be false; what is called ‘having a sensory perception’ is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking”.

Are Descartes’ grounds for doubt valid?

- How do we *know* that our senses sometimes deceive us other than by identifying, through the generality of our sensory experience, what is *real*? Doesn’t the so-called ‘argument from illusion’ hoist itself with its own petard?
- How do we *know* that we sometimes commit logical fallacies other than by applying logic we consider *valid*? Can we *ever* doubt the truth of ‘analytic’ statements such as “all bachelors are unmarried men” or “two plus two equals four”? Is not the validity of *deductive* reasoning (such as “all humans are mortal - we are humans - therefore we are mortal”) *self-evident*?

¹ “The necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing that something is the case are first that what one is said to know be true, secondly that one is sure of it and thirdly that one should have the right to be sure.” A. J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (Penguin Books, 1956).

² “The questions which philosophers raise about the possibility of knowledge are not all to be settled by discovering what knowledge is. For many of them reappear as questions about the legitimacy of the title to be sure.” (Ibid.)

- Our dreams and waking experiences differ in character. We can and do distinguish between them. The occurrence of dreaming is fully explainable within our waking 'model of reality'.

Much of what we think we know is based upon *induction* i.e. the drawing of general conclusions from available evidence. In the physical sciences, observation and experiment provide the basis for the formulation of theories which can then be tested through further observation and experiment. The absence of counter-evidence makes a theory plausible but can never prove it beyond all doubt. Albert Einstein recognised this in respect of his Special and General Theories of Relativity when he said: "No amount of experimentation can prove me right; a single experiment can prove me wrong". Counter-evidence may always arise which requires a theory to be abandoned or at least revised. Inductive reasoning, therefore, can be regarded as valid if the truth of the evidence upon which it is based makes its conclusions *probable* (rather than 100 per cent certain).

Induction is at least as important in the social sciences as in the physical sciences. Observation and experiment provide the basis for general theories about human behaviour. Social reality, of course, is less 'tangible' and less predictable than physical reality (which displays 'regularities' that can be expressed in the form of physical 'laws'). Probability is thus a key feature of the social sciences. Social reality, moreover, may differ over time and space. Much human behaviour is culturally influenced and cultures vary across the world and change over time. Theories relating to human behaviour, therefore, may be valid only in relation to particular times and places and can predict only that particular outcomes are likely, rather than certain. Especially problematic is our knowledge of the past. The further back we go the more our 'knowledge' comprises *speculation* based upon slender and tenuous evidence.

Our assessments of claims to knowledge and the validity of the evidence upon which they are based inevitably involve assumptions about 'the way the world is' based upon what we think we *already* know. Knowing that a scarf is in a drawer because we put it there implies not only faith in our memory but also a 'model' of reality in which things such as scarves have a degree of permanence, are not prone to spontaneous creation and annihilation and do not require, in some obscure way, to be perceived in order to exist.

Not everyone, of course, agrees about what constitutes relevant evidence for determining the truth of things. Some people (notably ideologues and religious fanatics) appear to regard the strength of their own convictions as adequate evidence of their truth. Descartes, we may note, having 'proved' to his own satisfaction the existence of a non-deceiving God, concluded that anything he clearly and distinctly perceived must be true. "I have perceived that God exists ... and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is of necessity true." He thereby felt assured that his involuntary 'sensory ideas' came from "another substance distinct from me ... For I do not see how God could ... be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things" [b].

In the light of the foregoing, questions we might discuss include:

- Can each one of us be certain of her or his *own* existence (e.g. on the basis "*I am thinking, therefore I exist*")?
- Can we be certain of each *other's* existence and that our discussion is not some bizarre dream?
- Can we doubt the existence of the chairs on which we are sitting and even of our own bodies?
- Are we sure that the table in front of us is *solid* and the stuff in our glasses *liquid*? Does 'science' suggest that these are illusions and why believe 'science' anyway?
- Do we have perfect knowledge of the contents of our own consciousnesses? Can anyone with toothache, for example, be mistaken about the reality of the pain experienced?
- Much of our knowledge is acquired 'second-hand' (e.g. from books and other media). Can we be sure that we are not the victims of some mad conspiracy to deceive us (e.g. into believing falsely that the Earth orbits the Sun or that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066)?

Roger Jennings
October 2014

References:

- [a] Descartes (1637) *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the sciences*.
[b] Descartes (1641) *Meditations on First Philosophy*.