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Theory of Knowledge

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How can we know anything?

Most prominently since Plato's quest for truth (*ἀλήθεια*) instead of appearance (*δόξα*), the human race is driven and defined by its urge for knowledge.¹ Our mental capacity is the unique feature that sets us apart from the animal world according to Aristotle² and Cicero³. Animals do also have knowledge, but apart from also learning through experience, humans intellectually form (*a priori*), argue and justify beliefs in order to maintain justified true beliefs in an epistemically rational way. This essay aims to answer the question how we can know anything by first challenging the objections of radical skepticism, secondly by analyzing *a priori* knowledge and finally by stating that epistemic rationality is instrumentally valuable, indispensable and prudent for getting humanly attainable knowledge.

The principle of closure is used by skeptics to draw the skeptical conclusion that everyday knowledge of anything of substance is not humanly attainable. As an epistemic principle, the principle of closure is a plausible way of extending knowledge by deduction from what we already know. This means that knowledge is deductively closed as proposition *p* entails *q* ($p \supset q$). However, I see a problem in the entailment itself. The entailed proposition *q* is derived from the first proposition *p*. But how did this closed set come about? Or to put it differently: On what basis is *q* deduced? Is it deduced or simply entailed without competent deduction? If it is just intuitively entailed without further reflection, it won't make a good

¹ Aristotle: *Metaphysics*, I, 1, 980a21.

² Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139a20 and *Politics*, 1253a10-18.

³ Cicero: *De oratore*, I, 32.

deduction in my opinion. But therein lies the problem: How to deduce that we cannot know anything from the premise that we cannot know the denials of skeptical hypothesis? The underlying condition is that we cannot distinguish normal from “not normal” circumstances such as Descartes’ Evil Demon or Putnam’s Brain in a Vat⁴. The skeptical perspective stipulates a high epistemic notion of knowledge, but what about reliable, safe (via laws of nature or via the “sensitivity” requirement) and justified beliefs as possible human knowledge that are formed upon sufficient justification and therefore rational to believe? According to the skeptic then, even ordinary knowledge or common-sense-knowledge is not attainable. But is this the case? And are the two notions of knowledge exclusive or perhaps just two different versions of an ephemeral phenomenon called “knowledge”? Furthermore, the skeptical claim is likewise under the burden of proof, which cannot be done as it is a circular inferential justification in the realm of “a possible world”⁵ without any complete evidence of its own to begin with. However, what skepticism reminds us to do is to always try to fool-prove our argumentation against objection by assuming a kind of radical dialectical stance towards our

⁴ The Evil Demon is a thought experiment by Descartes in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* to subject all beliefs to skeptical doubt in order to show the possibility that our minds are flawed. Putnam’s Brain in the Vat is today’s continuation of Descartes’ line of thinking as Putnam illustrates a scenario in which you are actually a brain in a vat connected to a computer program to simulate experiences of the world outside. If you cannot rule out that you are indeed a BIV, then how can you know if your beliefs about the external world are in fact true?

⁵ Hilary Putnam: “Brains in a Vat”, in: Michael Huemer (ed.): *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, p. 528.

own beliefs.⁶ This is the essence of the Socratic method of elenchus (ἐλεγχος) in order to defeat any fallacy in philosophy.

Radical skepticism makes use of *a priori* thinking. Putnam however purports that this is done „not in the old “absolute” sense”⁷ though as it discards the harsh distinction between empirical and *a priori*. The distinction *a priori* and empirical knowledge refers to the distinction of justification of judgements or “Urteile” following Kant (if a judgement is true or false), whereas the analytical and synthetic distinction refers to the relation of terms (A/B). *A priori* knowledge is knowledge independent of external experience and thus it is knowledge by reason before any experience.⁸ Empirical knowledge on the other hand is knowledge from experience such as the senses or empirical data. Thereby it is knowledge by experience. Kant calls it “*a posteriori*” which means “after” or “in” an experience.⁹ *A priori* is to be distinguished from innate knowledge: The first is not derived from experience but from reasoning alone, but the second is the knowledge you are simply born with such as Plato’s “Forms” or Chomsky’s “Universal Grammar”.

⁶ Plato: *Republic* VII, 533a7-9.

⁷ Hilary Putnam: “Brains in a Vat”, in: Michael Huemer (ed.): *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, p. 534.

⁸ Hume’s skepticism denotes that even though there is no rationally compelling reason to use induction when proving matters of fact to be true by operation of thought, humans still do as they can’t help themselves to behave rationally. Propositions expressing “matters of fact” (*a posteriori*) are to be distinguished from those describing “operation of thought” (*a priori*). David Hume: *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. IV, 1.

⁹ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason* B1, 2.

Kant defines “synthetic *a priori* knowledge” as follows: This kind of knowledge is found in natural science when the scientist goes beyond the concept of the matter. It describes knowledge that was gained by the predicate B which is not logically inherent to the subject A (synthetic) and gained by thought alone, not by empirical data for example. Humans think by using forms of perception and categories (quality, quantity, relation and modality). Thus, new knowledge is derived not from experience but from reasoning alone. And by virtue of its nature synthetic *a priori* knowledge cannot be false according to Kant¹⁰ and is in essence true knowledge by pure reason. In a nutshell, synthetic *a priori* knowledge denotes a possibility to objectify our knowledge and is thus Kant’s objection to Hume’s skepticism.

The question however still remains, if true knowledge as absolutely certain knowledge is even humanly attainable at all. *A priori* thinking relies on the possibility of epistemic rationality. But does human thinking consist in pure reasoning? And even if, is this any guarantee against human fallibility?

Epistemic rationality tries to offer a concept that smooths the way for true beliefs by maximising the number of true beliefs by evaluating evidence in an objective manner as one rational method in order to reach the goal of minimising falsehood. What is gained by that? First, it’s a good start but soon problems present themselves such as the notion of epistemic rationality that is too vague and thus, false beliefs cannot be avoided at all times. One question remains: Can we philosophers overcome our fallibility as human beings to get to pure epistemic rationality or are we inherently attached to “bounded rationality”¹¹ by nature? It’s a given that

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason* A XV.

¹¹ Simon, Herbert A.: “A behavioral model of rational choice.” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (1955), vol. 69, n. 1: pp. 99-118. Under:
<https://www.suz.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:ffffff-fad3-547b-ffff-ffff0bf4572/10.18-simon-55.pdf>; last

we cannot escape our bounded human nature with all its downfalls, but epistemic rationality holds more sway than eventual fallibility as it is a plausible process of probing beliefs. This essay argues that epistemic rationality is instrumentally valuable, indispensable and prudent for getting humanly attainable knowledge. It is instrumentally valuable when aiming at true beliefs by reason: A belief is probed and thereby becomes first a rationally held, then a true belief and finally true belief is transformed into knowledge if all goes to plan.¹² Epistemic rationality is indispensable when using and testing evidence for detecting errors (non-deontic notion of epistemic rationality). And it is prudent as it gives the agent a chance to reflect on the probability of a testimony for example and thereby forming a belief responsibly (deontic notion of epistemic rationality). Hence, both internalist and externalist approach have positive aspects in establishing what does count as knowledge.

Which brings us back to the question how can we know anything and is true knowledge even humanly attainable? This essay argues that radical skepticism and epistemic rationality are appropriate ways to defeat fallacy in philosophy by probing beliefs against objections. In virtue of the human nature and its limits, man isn't able to infallibly maintain the Kantian ideal of „pure thinking“¹³ but he is incumbent on his *ratio* to get to the truth and eventually to knowledge. The very fact that true beliefs must be argued and justified in order to count as

access: 29.10.2020. Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. “Judgement under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases.” *Science* (1974), vol. 185: pp. 1124-1131.

¹² However, it is Gettier style counterexamples to the justified true belief (JTB) concept of knowledge (the tripartite definition of knowledge) that demonstrate how external interference poses a problem to this definition and thereby they refute the JTB concept (the *Gettier problem*). To sufficiently define knowledge a fourth condition seems to be missing.

¹³ Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason* A XIII.

knowledge pertains the core task of rhetoric, whereas the high threshold knowledge of skepticism and epistemology in itself as the theory of knowledge that analyses the nature and value of knowledge capture the facets of this Herculean task for philosophers. It might be Herculean but we as humans are genuinely set up for this quest by our own nature of mental capacities and our innate urge for knowledge:

„Consider ye the seed from which ye sprang;
Ye were not made to live like unto brutes,
But for pursuit of virtue and of knowledge.”¹⁴

¹⁴ Dante Aligheri: *Divine Comedy*, Inferno Canto XXVI, 118-120.

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