

Philosophy Café at The Letter Lounge

Sunday 27 August 2017

How do we know what we know? The philosophy of knowledge

Presented by Peter Ellerton (Critical Thinking Project, University of Queensland)

Summary of key points

Epistemology is concerned with knowledge and belief, and how they are formed. How you know what you know is true? What are the similarities between knowledge and belief?

Criteria for judging knowledge: a common view is that there are three criteria for judging knowledge: knowledge is justified, true and believed. To know something, you need to believe it, and whether you can 'choose' to believe something is questionable. To believe something you need reasons to believe it: that is, you need to be able to justify it.

Gettier wrote a paper challenging the concept that knowledge can be based on justification, truth and belief. It's possible to have a situation where knowledge is true but is based on incorrect information (and therefore mistaken). A person can be wrong, even though they think they know something.

Coherentism: the idea that we have a coherent system of beliefs, and we believe something if it's consistent with our other beliefs. We all have our own narratives, and we have a sense of internal coherence (and therefore a sense of what is true). The coherentist's nightmare is when everything fits the pattern except for one concept/idea – and that concept/idea challenges acceptance of everything else.

Foundationalism: knowledge rests on foundational beliefs, which themselves require no justification. There's a strong sense of foundationalism in modern education. It leads to a desire to identify basic truths.

Pragmatism: knowledge is a collection of beliefs that have utility and provide a resource for further inquiry. Thinking → beliefs → action. Asking whether the knowledge is 'true' isn't fully relevant; the inquiry leads you to accept it. The knowledge can become a resource for further inquiry, which leads to growth. Much scientific inquiry sits here.

Absolutism: suggests that it's possible to find absolute truth.

Relativism: suggests that there is no absolute truth.

Constructivism: knowledge is not passively received. Everything that comes to us needs to fit with what we already know. This doesn't mean that anything goes, simply that people interact with what they learn.

Is the point to find truth? Perhaps the point is to challenge people who make knowledge claims. If you claim something to be true, you need to be able to talk about how you know it to be true.

Where does common sense fit? What do we mean by that? It's a strong tool for knowing about the world. But it's not shared by everyone. It's based on your personal experience of what works well. It can be seen as a communal sense of wisdom, or a shared understanding of how others are thinking.

Unpacking thought processes is a path to resilience: it's about learning to build robust arguments and have rational processes. The philosophical inquiry is about being consistent with the process, not the outcome.

Summary by Dr Judy Gregory, Northside Meetings