

“Everyone knows X”: analytic philosophy, medicine, and Lacanian psychoanalysis

Sometimes we encounter statements of the form “Everyone knows X.” For example, I once heard, “Everyone knows that moral claims are just expressions of emotions.” How should we understand statements of this form? Here are some proposals.

Literally. Every single person knows X.

“Statistically.” Most people know X.

Contractually. There is an agreement to count X as known, whether any individual knows X or not.

Representationally. There is some person who is the representative of everyone and this person knows X.

Even so-and-so knows X. There is some person who is the representative of ignorance and even they know X. (“Even I know that!”)

Innately. Every human being has an innate knowledge of X.

Economically. Every individual in some rational actor model knows X.

Medically. The statement conveys that X is suitable for a doctor to ask questions about when testing a patient suffering from some mental disorder, e.g. “Do you know what year it is?”

An Internet analysis. If one does an Internet search for X, one finds that X is affirmed.

Lacanian Big Other? I believe Lacanian psychoanalysts would say that this kind of statement means “The big Other knows X.” I am not sure what that means yet, but the big Other is supposed to be a fiction, so I guess there is some relation to “In such and such a fiction, X is known.”

World-mindedly. All the individual minds are part of a world mind and this world mind knows X.

Cambridge analytically? There is some argument for the paradoxical conclusion “The set of people who don’t know X knows X.”

The concept of a person. Presumably, for a literal reading, “person” covers any human being, but perhaps some assertions of this form should be interpreted as referring to any adult human being and some as working with an even more restricted concept: “You don’t count as a person unless...” or “You don’t count as a person in this context unless...” or some other means of restriction, usually illiberal.