

2 Understanding Human Knowledge in General

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The philosophical study of human knowledge seeks to understand what human knowledge is and how it comes to be. A long tradition of reflection on these questions suggests that we can never get the kind of satisfaction we seek. Either we reach the skeptical conclusion that we do not know the things we thought we knew, or we cannot see how the state we find ourselves in is a state of knowledge.

Most philosophers today still deny, or at the very least resist, the force of such reflections. In their efforts to construct a positive theory of knowledge they operate on the not-unreasonable assumption that since human perception, belief, and knowledge are natural phenomena like any other, there is no more reason to think they cannot be understood and explained than there is to think that digestion or photosynthesis cannot be understood and explained. Even if there is still much to be learned about human cognition, it can hardly be denied that we already know a great deal, at least in general, about how it works. Many see it now as just a matter of filling in the details, either from physiology or from something called "cognitive science." We might find that we understand much less than we think we do, but even so it would seem absurd simply to deny that there is such a thing as human knowledge at all, or that we can ever understand how it comes to be. Those traditional skeptical considerations, whatever they were, therefore tend to be ignored. They will be refuted in any case by a successful theory that explains how we do in fact know the things we do.

It would be as absurd to cast doubt on the prospects of scientific investigation of human knowledge and perception as it would be to declare limits to our understanding of human digestion. But I think that what we seek in epistemology — in the philosophical study of human knowledge — is not just anything we can find about how we know things. We try to understand human knowledge in general, and to do so in a certain special way. If the philosophical investigation of knowledge is something distinctive, or sets itself certain special or unique goals, one might question whether those

goals can really be reached without thereby casting any doubt on investigations of human knowledge which lack those distinctive philosophical features. That is what I shall try to do. I want to raise and examine the possibility that, however much we came to learn about this or that aspect of human knowledge, thought, and perception, there might still be nothing that could satisfy us as a philosophical understanding of how human knowledge is possible.

When I say nothing could satisfy us I do not mean that it is a very difficult task and that we will never finish the job. It *is* very difficult, and we *will* never finish the job, but I assume that is true of most of our efforts to understand anything. Rather, the threat I see is that once we really understand what we aspire to in the philosophical study of knowledge, and we do not deviate from the aspiration to understand it in that way, we will be forever unable to get the kind of understanding that would satisfy us.

That is one reason I think skepticism is so important in epistemology. It is the view that we do not, or perhaps cannot, know anything, and it is important because it seems to be the inevitable consequence of trying to understand human knowledge in a certain way. Almost nobody thinks for a moment that skepticism could be correct. But that does not mean it is not important. If skepticism really is the inevitable outcome of trying to understand human knowledge in a certain way, and we think it simply could not be correct, that should make us look much more critically at that way of trying to understand human knowledge in the first place. But that is not what typically happens in philosophy. The goal itself is scarcely questioned, and for good reason. We feel human knowledge ought to be intelligible in that way. The epistemological project feels like the pursuit of a perfectly comprehensible intellectual goal. We know that skepticism is no good; it is an answer, but it is not satisfactory. But being constitutionally unable to arrive at an answer to a perfectly comprehensible question is not satisfactory either. We therefore continue to acquiesce in the traditional problem and do not acknowledge that there is no satisfactory solution. We proceed as if it must be possible to find an answer, so we deny the force, and even the interest, of skepticism.

What we seek in the philosophical theory of knowledge is an account that is completely general in several respects. We want to understand how any knowledge at all is possible — how anything we currently accept amounts to knowledge. Or, less ambitiously, we want to understand with complete generality how we come to know anything at all in a certain specified domain.

For example, in the traditional question of our knowledge of the material bodies around us we want to understand how we know anything at all about any such bodies. In the philosophical problem of other minds we want to understand how any person ever comes to know anything at all

about what is going on in the mind of any other person, or even knows that there are any other minds at all. In the case of induction we want to understand how anyone can ever have any reason at all to believe anything beyond what he himself has so far observed to be true. I take it to be the job of a positive philosophical theory of knowledge to answer these and similarly general questions.

One kind of generality I have in mind is revealed by what we would all regard as no answer at all to the philosophical problem. The question of other minds is how anyone can know what someone else thinks or feels. But it would be ludicrous to reply that someone can know what another person thinks or feels by asking a good friend of that person's. That would be no answer at all, but not because it is not true. I *can* sometimes find out what someone else thinks by asking his best friend. But that would not contribute to the solution to the philosophical problem of other minds. We are not simply looking for a list of all the ways of knowing. If we were, that way of knowing would go on the list. But in fact we seek a more inclusive description of all our ways of knowing that would explain our knowledge in general.

What is wrong with that particular way of knowing the mind of another is not that it is only one way among others. The trouble is that it explains how we know some particular fact in the area we are interested in by appeal to knowledge of some other fact in that same domain. I know what Smith thinks by knowing that Jones told me what Smith thinks. But knowing that Jones told me something is itself a bit of knowledge about the mind of another. So that kind of answer could not serve as, nor could it be generalized into, a satisfactory answer to the question how we know anything at all about any other minds. Not because it does not mention a legitimate way of knowing something about the mind of another. It does. Coming to know what Smith thinks by asking Jones is a perfectly acceptable way of knowing, and it is a different way of getting that knowledge from having Smith tell me himself, or from reading Smith's mail. There is nothing wrong with it in itself as an explanation. It is only for the general philosophical task that it is felt to be inadequate.

The same holds for everyday knowledge of the objects around us. One way I can know that my neighbor is at home is by seeing her car in front of her house, where she parks it when and only when she is at home. That is a perfectly good explanation of how I know that fact about one of the things around me. It is a different way of knowing where my neighbor is from seeing her through the window or hearing her characteristic fumlings on the piano. But it could not satisfy us as an explanation of how I know anything at all about any objects around me. It explains how I know something about one object around me — my neighbor — by knowing something about another object around me — her car. It could not answer

the philosophical question as to how I know anything about any objects around me at all.

The kind of generality at stake in these problems takes its characteristic philosophical form when we come to see, on reflection, that the information available to us for knowing things in a particular domain is systematically less than we might originally have thought. Perhaps the most familiar instance of this is the *First Meditation* of Descartes,¹ in which he asks about knowledge of the material world by means of the senses. It apparently turns out on reflection that the senses give us less than we might have thought; there is no strictly sensory information the possession of which necessarily amounts to knowledge of the material world. We could perceive exactly what we perceive now even if there were no material world at all. The problem then is to see how we ever come to get knowledge of the material world on that sensory basis.

In the case of other minds we find on reflection that the only evidence we can ever have or even imagine for the mental states of other people is their bodily behavior, including the sounds coming out of their mouths, or even the tears coming out of their eyes. But there is no strictly physical or behavioral information the possession of which necessarily amounts to knowledge of another person's mind or feelings. With induction the general distinction is perhaps even more obvious. The only reason we could ever have for believing anything about what we are not observing at the moment is something we have observed in the past or are observing right now. The problem then is how any knowledge of strictly past or even present fact amounts to knowledge of, or reasonable belief in, some unobserved or future fact.

These apparently simple, problem-generating moves come right at the beginning of epistemology. They are usually taken as so obvious and undeniable that the real problems of epistemology are thought to arise only after they have been made. In this paper I simply assume familiarity with them and with how easily they work. They are the very moves I think we eventually must examine more carefully if we are ever going to understand the real source of the dissatisfaction we are so easily driven to in philosophy. But for now I am concerned with the structure of the plight such reflections appear to leave us in.

If we start by considering a certain domain of facts or truths and ask how anyone could come to know anything at all in that domain, it will seem that any other knowledge that might be relevant could not be allowed to amount to already knowing something in the domain in question. Knowledge of anything at all in that domain is what we want to explain, and if we simply assume from the outset that the person has already got some of that knowledge we will not be explaining all of it. Any knowledge we do grant to the person will be of use to him only if he can somehow get from that

knowledge to some knowledge in the domain in question. Some inference or transition would therefore appear to be needed — for example, some way of going from what he is aware of in perception to knowledge of the facts he claims to know. But any such inference will be a good one, and will lead the person to knowledge, only if it is based on something the person also knows or has some reason to believe. He cannot just be making a guess that he has got good evidence. He has to know or at least have reason to believe something that will help get him from his evidential base to some knowledge in the domain in question. That “something” that he needs to know cannot simply be part of his evidential base, since it has to get him beyond that base. But it cannot go so far beyond that base as to imply something already in the domain in question either, since the knowledge of anything at all in that domain is just what we are trying to explain. So it would seem that on either possibility we cannot explain with the proper generality how the kind of knowledge we want to understand is possible. If the person does know what he needs to know, he has already got some knowledge in the domain in question, and if he does not, he will not be able to get there from his evidential base alone.

This apparent dilemma is a familiar quandary in traditional epistemology. I think it arises from our completely general explanatory goal. We want to explain a certain kind of knowledge, and we feel we must explain it on the basis of another, prior kind of knowledge that does not imply or presuppose any of the knowledge we are trying to explain. Without that, we will not be explaining the knowledge in question in the proper, fully general way. This felt need is what so easily brings into the epistemological project some notion or other of what is usually called “epistemic priority” — one kind of knowledge being prior to another. I believe it has fatal consequences for our understanding of our knowledge. It is often said that traditional epistemology is generated by nothing more than a misguided “quest for certainty,” or a fruitless search for absolutely secure “foundations” for knowledge, and that once we abandon such a will-o’-the-wisp we will no longer be threatened by skepticism, or even much interested in it.² But that diagnosis seems wrong to me — in fact, completely upside down. What some philosophers see as a poorly motivated demand for “foundations” of knowledge looks to me to be the natural consequence of seeking a certain intellectual goal, a certain kind of understanding of human knowledge in general.

In the philosophical problem of other minds, for example, we pick out observable physical movements or “behavior” and ask how on that basis alone, which is the only basis we have, we can ever know anything about the mind behind the “behavior.” Those observable facts of “behavior” are held to be “epistemically prior” to any facts about the mind in the sense that it is possible to know all such facts about others’ “behavior” without

knowing anything about their minds. We insist on that condition for a properly general explanation of our knowledge of other minds. But in doing so we need not suppose that our beliefs about that "behavior" are themselves indubitable or incorrigible "foundations" of anything. Levels of relative epistemic priority are all we need to rely on in pressing the epistemological question in that way.

In the case of our knowledge of the material objects around us we single out epistemically prior "sensations" or "sense data" or "experiences" or whatever it might be, and then ask how on that basis alone, which is the only basis we have, we can know anything of the objects around us. We take it that knowledge of objects comes to us somehow by means of the senses, but if we thought of sensory knowledge as itself knowledge of material objects around us we would not get an appropriately general explanation of how any knowledge of any objects at all is possible by means of the senses. We would be explaining knowledge of some material objects only on the basis of knowledge of some others. "Data," "the given," "experiences," and so on, which traditional epistemologists have always trafficked in, therefore look to me much more like inevitable products of the epistemological enterprise than elusive "foundations," the unmotivated quest for which somehow throws us into epistemology in the first place.

But once we accept the idea of one kind of knowledge being prior to another as an essential ingredient in the kind of philosophical understanding we seek, it immediately becomes difficult even to imagine, let alone to find, anything that could satisfy us. How *could* we possibly know anything about the minds of other people on the basis only of truths about their "behavior" if those truths do not imply anything about any minds? If we really are restricted in perception to "experiences" or "sense data" or "stimulations" which give us information that is prior to any knowledge of objects, how *could* we ever know anything about what goes on beyond such prior "data"? It would seem to be possible only if we somehow knew of some connection between what we are restricted to in observation and what is true in the wider domain we are interested in. But then knowing even that there was such a connection would be knowing something about that wider domain after all, not just about what we are restricted to in observation. And then we would be left with no satisfactorily general explanation of our knowledge.

In short, it seems that if we really were in the position the traditional account in terms of epistemic priority describes us as being in, skepticism would be correct. We could not know the things we think we know. But if, in order to resist that conclusion, we no longer see ourselves in that traditional way, we will not have a satisfactorily general explanation of all our knowledge in a certain domain.

Theorists of knowledge who accept the traditional picture of our position in the world obviously do not acknowledge what I see as its

skeptical or otherwise unsatisfactory consequences. Some philosophers see their task as that of exhibiting the general structure of our knowledge by making explicit what they think are the “assumptions” or “postulates” or “epistemic principles” that are needed to take us from our “data” or evidence in a particular area to some richer domain of knowledge we want to explain.³ The fact that certain “postulates” or “principles” can be shown to be precisely what is needed for the knowledge in question is somehow taken to count in their favour. Without those “principles,” it is argued, we wouldn’t know what we think we know.

However illuminating such “rational reconstructions” of our knowledge might be, they cannot really satisfy us if we want to understand how we actually do know the things we think we know. If it had been shown that there is a certain “postulate” or “principle” which we have to have some reason to accept if we are to know anything about, say, the world around us, we would not thereby have come to understand how we do know anything about the world around us. We would have identified something we need, but its indispensability would not show that we do in fact have good reason to accept it. We would be left with the further question whether we know that that “principle” is true, and if so how. And all the rest of the knowledge we wanted to explain would then be hanging in the balance, since it would have been shown to depend on that “principle.” Trying to answer the question of its justification would lead right back into the old dilemma. If the “principle” involved says or implies something richer than anything to be found in the prior evidential base — as it seems it must if it is going to be of any help — there will be nothing in that base alone that could give us reason to accept it. But if we assume from the outset that we do know or have some reason to accept that “principle,” we will be assuming that we already know something that goes beyond our prior evidential base, and that knowledge itself will not have been explained. We would therefore have no completely general explanation of how we get beyond that base to any knowledge of the kind in question.

The threat of a regress in the support for any such “principles” leads naturally to the idea of two distinct sources or types of knowledge. If the “principles” or presuppositions of knowledge could be known independently, not on the basis of the prior evidence, but in some other way, it might seem that the regress could be avoided. This might be said to be what Kant learned from Hume:⁴ if all our knowledge is derived from experience, we can never know anything. But Kant did not infer from that conditional proposition the categorical skeptical conclusion he thought Hume drew from it. For Kant the point was that if we do have knowledge from experience we must also have some knowledge that is independent of experience. Only in that way is experiential knowledge possible. We must know some things *a priori* if we know anything at all.

As a way of explaining how we know the things we do, this merely postpones or expands the problem. It avoids the skeptical regress in sensory knowledge of the world by insisting that the basic "principles" or presuppositions needed for such empirical knowledge do not themselves depend on empirical, sensory support. But that says only that those "principles" are *not* known by experience; it does not explain how they are known. Merely being presupposed by our empirical knowledge confers no independent support. It has to be explained how we know anything at all *a priori*, and how in particular we know those very things we need for empirical knowledge. And then the old dilemma presents itself again. If our *a priori* knowledge of those "principles" is derived from something prior to them which serves as their evidential base, it must be shown how the further "principles" needed to take us from that base to the "principles" in question could themselves be supported. If we assume from the outset that we do know some "principles" *a priori*, not all of our *a priori* knowledge in general will have been explained. It would seem that *a priori* knowledge in general could be explained only in terms of something that is not itself *a priori* knowledge. But empirical knowledge cannot explain *a priori* knowledge — and it would be no help here even if it could — so either we must simply accept the unexplained fact that we know things *a priori* or we must try to explain it without appealing to any other knowledge at all.

I do not want to go further into the question of *a priori* knowledge. Not because it is not difficult and important in its own right, but because many theorists of knowledge would now argue that it is irrelevant to the epistemological project of explaining our knowledge of the world around us. They find they can put their finger precisely on the place where the traditional philosophical enterprise turns inevitably towards skepticism. And they hold that that step is wrong, and that without it there is no obstacle to finding a satisfactory account of our epistemic position that avoids any commitment to skepticism. This claim for a new "enlightened" theory of knowledge that does not take that allegedly skeptical step is what I want to question.

I have already sketched the hopeless plight I think the old conception leaves us in. The trouble in that conception is now thought to enter at just the point at which the regress I have described apparently gets started. To get from his "evidence" to any of the knowledge in question the person was said to need some "principle" or assumption that would take him from that "evidence" to that conclusion. But he would also need some reason for accepting that "principle" — he would have to know something else that supports it. And then he would need some reason for accepting that "something else," and it could not be found either in his evidential base or in the "principles" he originally needed to take him beyond that base. It must be found in something else in turn — another "something else" — and so

on *ad infinitum*. What is wrong in this, it is now thought, is not the idea that the person cannot find such reasons, or that he can only find them somehow mysteriously *a priori*. What is wrong is the requirement that he himself has to find such reasons, that he has to be able to support his "principles," at all. The new "enlightened" approach to knowledge insists that there is a clear sense in which he does not.

The objection can be put another way. What is wrong with the traditional epistemological project that leads so easily to skepticism, it is said, is that the whole thing assumes that anyone who knows something must know that he knows it. He must himself know that his reasons are good ones, or that his prior "evidence" is adequate to yield knowledge of the kind in question. And then, by that same assumption, he must know that he knows that, and so on. But that assumption, it is argued, is not correct. It is obviously possible for someone to know something without knowing that he knows it. The theory of knowledge asks simply whether and how people know things. If that can be explained, that is enough. The fact that people sometimes do not know that they know things should not make us deny that they really do know those things — especially if we have a satisfactory theory that explains that knowledge.

Now it certainly seems right to allow that someone can know something even when we recognize that he does not know that he knows it. Think of the simplest ordinary examples. Someone is asked if he knows who won the battle of Hastings, and when it took place, and he tentatively replies "William the Conqueror, 1066." He knew the answer. He had learned it in school, perhaps, and had never forgotten it, but at the time he was asked he did not know whether he had really retained that information. He was not sure about the state of his knowledge, but as for the winner and the date of the battle of Hastings, he knew that all along. He knew more than he thought he did. So whether somebody knows something is one thing; whether he knows that he knows it is something else. That seems to be a fact about our everyday assessments of people's knowledge.

The question is not whether that is a fact, but what significance it has for the prospects of the philosophical theory of knowledge. Obviously it turns on what a satisfactory philosophical account is supposed to do. The goal as I have presented it so far is to take ourselves and our ways of knowing on the one hand, and a certain domain of truths that we want to know about on the other, and to understand how we know any of those truths at all on the basis of prior knowledge that does not amount to already knowing something in the domain we are interested in. The question was what support we could find for the bridge that would be needed to get us from that prior basis to the knowledge in question. The present suggestion amounts in effect to saying that no independent or *a priori* support is needed on the part of the knower. All that is needed is that a certain proposition should be

true; the person doesn't have to know that it is true in order to know the thing in question. If he has the appropriate prior knowledge or experience, and there is in fact a truth linking his having that knowledge or experience with his knowing something in the domain in question, then he does in fact know something in that domain, even if he is not aware of the favorable epistemic position he is in.

The truth in question will typically be one expressing the definition of knowledge, or of having reason to believe something. The search for such definitions is what many philosophers regard as the special job of the philosophical theory of knowledge. If knowing something could be defined solely in terms of knowledge or experience in some unproblematic, prior domain, then that definition could be fulfilled even if you didn't know that you knew anything in that domain. You yourself would not have to find a "bridge" from your evidential basis to the knowledge in question. As long as there actually was a "bridge" under your feet, whether you knew of it or not, there would be no threat of a skeptical regress.

In one form, this anti-skeptical strategy has been applied to the problem of induction. Hume had argued that if a long positive correlation observed to hold between two sorts of things in the past is going to give you some reason now to expect a thing of the second sort, given an observed instance of the first, you will also have to have some reason to think that what you have observed in the past gives you some reason to believe something about the future. P.F. Strawson replied that you need no such thing. Having observed a long positive correlation between two sorts of things under widely varied circumstances in the past is just what it is — what it means — to have reason to expect a thing of the second sort, given that a thing of the first sort has just appeared.⁵ If that is a necessary truth about reasonable belief it will guarantee that you do in fact have a reasonable belief in the future as long as you have had the requisite experience of the past and present. You do not have to find some additional reason for thinking that what you have observed in the past gives you good reason to believe something about the future.

This has come to be called an "externalist" account of knowledge or reasonable belief. It would explain knowledge in terms of conditions that are available from an "external," third-person point of view, independent of what the knower's own attitude towards the fulfillment of those conditions might be. It is not all smooth sailing. To give us what we need, it has to come up with an account of knowledge or reasonable belief that is actually correct — that distinguishes knowledge from lack of knowledge in the right way. I think the account just given of inductive reasons does not meet that test. As it stands, it does not state a necessary truth about reasons to believe.⁶ To come closer to being right, it would have to define the difference between a "law-like" generalization and a merely "accidental" correlation which

does not give reason to believe it will continue. That task is by no means trivial, and it faces a "new riddle of induction" all over again.⁷ But if we do draw a distinction between having good reasons and not having them it would seem that there must be some account that captures what we do. It is just a matter of finding what it is.

The same goes for definitions of knowledge. One type of view says that knowing that *p* is equivalent to something like having acquired and retained a true belief that *p* as a result of the operation of a properly functioning, reliable belief-forming mechanism.⁸ That general scheme still leaves many things unexplained or undefined, and it is no trivial task to get it to come out right. But I am not concerned here with the details of "externalist" definitions of knowledge. My reservations about the philosophical theory of knowledge are not just that it is difficult. I have doubts about the satisfactoriness of what you would have even if you had an "externalist" account of knowledge which as far as you could tell matched up completely with those cases in which we think other people know things and those in which we think they do not.

Here we come up against another, and perhaps the most important, dimension of generality I think we seek in the theory of knowledge. We want an account that explains how human knowledge in general is possible, or how anyone can know anything at all in a certain specified domain. The difficulty arises now from the fact that we as human theorists are ourselves part of the subject-matter that we theorists of human knowledge want to understand in a certain way. If we merely study another group and draw conclusions only about them, no such difficulty presents itself. But then our conclusions will not be completely general. They will be known to apply only to those others, and we will be no closer to understanding how our own knowledge is possible. We want to be able to apply what we find out about knowledge to ourselves, and so to explain how our own knowledge is possible.

I have already suggested why I think we cannot get a satisfactory explanation along traditional Cartesian lines. The promise of the new "externalist" strategy is that it would avoid the regress that seems inevitable in that project. A person who knows something does not himself have to know that what he has got in his prior evidential base amounts to knowledge in the domain in question. As long as he in fact satisfies the conditions of knowing something in the domain we are interested in, there is nothing more he has to do in order to know things in that domain. No regress gets started.

The question now is: can we find such a theory satisfactory when we apply it to ourselves? To illustrate what I find difficult here I return to Descartes, as we so often must do in this subject. Not to his skeptical argument in the *First Meditation*, but to the answer he gives to it throughout the rest of the *Meditations*. He eventually comes to think that he does know

many of the things that seemed to be thrown into doubt by his earlier reflections on dreaming and the evil demon. He does so by proving that God exists and is not a deceiver and that everything in us, including our capacity to perceive and think, comes from God. So whatever we clearly and distinctly perceive to be true is true. God would not have it any other way. By knowing what I know about God I can know that He is not a deceiver and therefore that I do know the things I think I know when I clearly and distinctly perceive them. If I am careful, and keep God and his goodness in mind, I can know many things, and the threat of skepticism is overcome.

Many objections have been made to this answer to Descartes's question about his knowledge. One is the "externalist" complaint that Descartes's whole challenge rests on the assumption that you don't know something unless you know that you know it. Not only do my clear and distinct perceptions need some guarantee, but on Descartes's view I have to know what that guarantee is. That is why he thinks the atheist or the person who denies God in his heart cannot really know those things that we who accept Descartes's proof of God's existence and goodness can know.⁹ But according to "externalism" that requirement is wrong; you don't have to know that you know in order to know something.

Another and perhaps the most famous objection is that Descartes's proof of the guarantee of his knowledge is no good because it is circular. The knowledge he needs in order to reach the conclusion of God's existence and goodness is available to him only if God's existence and goodness have already been proved. What he calls his clear and distinct perception of God's existence will be knowledge of God's existence only if whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives is true. But that is guaranteed only by God, so he can't know that it is guaranteed unless he already knows that God exists.

Taking these two objections together, we can see that if the first is correct, the second is no objection at all. If Descartes is assuming that knowing requires knowing that you know, and if that assumption is wrong, then the charge of circularity has no force against his view. If "externalism" were correct, Descartes's inability to prove that God exists and guarantees the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions would be no obstacle to his knowing the truth of whatever he clearly and distinctly perceives. He would not have to know that he knows those things. As long as God did in fact exist and did in fact make sure that his clear and distinct perceptions were true, Descartes would have the knowledge he started out thinking he had, even if God's existence and nature remained eternally unknown to him. The soundness of his proof would not matter. All that would matter for the everyday knowledge Descartes is trying to account for is the truth of its conclusion — God's existence and goodness. If that conclusion is in fact

true, his inability to know that it is true would be no argument against his account.

To develop this thought further we can try to imagine what an “enlightened” or “externalist,” but still otherwise Cartesian, theory might look like. It would insist that the knowing subject does not have to know the truth of the theory that explains his knowledge in order to have the knowledge that the theory is trying to account for. Otherwise, the theory would retain the full Cartesian story of God and his goodness and his guarantee of the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions. What would be wrong with accepting such an “enlightened” theory? If we are willing to accept the kind of theory that says that knowing that *p* is having acquired the true belief that *p* by some reliable belief-forming mechanism, why would we not be equally or even more willing to accept a theory that says that knowing that *p* is having acquired the true belief that *p* by clearly and distinctly perceiving it — a method of belief formation that is reliable because God guarantees that whatever is clearly and distinctly perceived is true? It is actually more specific than a completely general form of “externalism” or “reliabilism.” It explains *why* the belief-forming mechanism is reliable. What, then, would be wrong with accepting it?

I think most of us simply don’t believe it. We think that God does not in fact exist and is not the guarantor of the reliability of our belief-forming mechanisms. So we think that what this theory says about human knowledge is not true. Now that is certainly a defect in a theory, but is it the only thing standing in the way of our accepting it and finding it satisfactory? It seems to me it is not, and perhaps by examining its other defects, beyond its actual truth-value, we can identify a source of dissatisfaction with other “externalist” theories as well.

We have to admit that if the imagined “externalist” Cartesian theory were true, we would know many of the things we think we know. So skepticism would not be correct. But in the philosophical investigation of knowledge we want more than the falsity of skepticism and more than the mere possession of the knowledge we ordinarily think we’ve got. We want to understand how we know the things we know, how skepticism turns out not to be true. And even if this “enlightened” Cartesian story were in fact true, if we didn’t know that it was, or if we didn’t have some reason to believe that it was, we would be no further along towards understanding our knowledge than we would be if the theory were false. So we need some reason to accept a theory of knowledge if we are going to rely on that theory to understand how our knowledge is possible. That is what I think no form of “externalism” can give a satisfactory account of.

Suppose someone had said to Descartes, as they in effect did, “Look, you have no reason to accept any of this story about God and his guarantee

of the truth of your clear and distinct perceptions. Of course, if what you say were true you would have the knowledge you think you have, but your whole proof of it is circular. You could justify your explanation of knowledge only if you already knew that what you clearly and distinctly perceive is true." Could an "enlightened" "externalist" Descartes reply: "That's right. I suppose I have to admit that I can give no good reason to accept my explanation. But that doesn't really bother me any more, now that I am an "externalist." Circularity in my proofs is no objection to my theory if "externalism" is correct. I still do believe my theory, after all, and as long as that theory is in fact true — whether I can give any reason to accept it or not — skepticism will be false and I will in fact know the things that I clearly and carefully claim to know."

I take it that that response is inadequate. The "externalist" Descartes I have imagined would not have a satisfactory understanding of his knowledge. It is crucial to what I want to say about "externalism" that we recognize some inadequacy in his position. It is admittedly not easy to specify exactly what the deficiency or the unsatisfactoriness of accepting that position amounts to. I think this much can be said: if the imagined Descartes responded only in that way he would be at best in the position of saying, "If the story that I accept is true, I do know the things I think I know. But I admit that if it is false, and a certain other story is true instead, then I do not." If "externalism" is correct, what he would be saying here is true. His theory, if true, would explain his knowledge. The difficulty is that until he finds some reason to believe his theory rather than some other, he cannot be said to have explained how he knows the things he knows. That is not because he is assuming that a person cannot know something unless he knows that he knows it. He has explicitly abandoned that assumption. He admits that people know things whether they know the truth of his theory or not. The same of course holds for him. And he knows that implication. That is precisely what he is saying: if his theory is true he will know the things he thinks he knows. But he is, in addition, a theorist of knowledge. He wants to understand how he knows the things he thinks he knows. And he cannot satisfy himself on that score unless he can see himself as having some reason to accept the theory that he (and all the rest of us) can recognize would explain his knowledge if it were true. That is not because knowing implies knowing that you know. It is because having an explanation of something in the sense of understanding it is a matter of having good reason to accept something that would be an explanation if it were true.

The question now is whether an "externalist" scientific epistemologist who rejects Descartes's explanation and offers one of his own is in any better position when he comes to apply his theory to his own knowledge than the imagined "externalist" Descartes is in. He begins by asking about all knowledge in a specified domain. A philosophically satisfactory expla-

nation of such knowledge must not explain some of the knowledge in the domain in question by appeal to knowledge of something else already in the domain. But the scientific student of human knowledge must know or have some reason to believe his theory of knowledge if he is going to understand how knowledge is possible. His theory about our belief-forming mechanisms and their reliability is a theory about the interactions between us and the world around us. It is arrived at by studying human beings, finding out how they get the beliefs they do, and investigating the sources of the reliability of those belief-forming mechanisms. Descartes claimed knowledge of God and his goodness, and of the relation between those supernatural facts and our earth-bound belief-forming mechanisms. A more naturalistic epistemologist's gaze does not reach so high. He claims knowledge of nothing more than the familiar natural world in which he thinks everything happens. But he will have an explanation of human knowledge, and so will understand how people know the things they do, only if he knows or has some reason to believe that his scientific story of the goings-on in that world is true.

If his goal was, among other things, to explain our scientific knowledge of the world around us, he will have an explanation of such knowledge only if he can see himself as possessing some knowledge in that domain. In studying other people, that presents no difficulty. It is precisely by knowing what he does about the world that he explains how others know what they do about the world. But if he had started out asking how anyone knows anything at all about the world, he would be no further along towards understanding how any of it is possible if he had not understood how he himself knows what he has to know about the world in order to have any explanation at all. He must understand himself as knowing or having reason to believe that his theory is true.

It might seem that he fulfills that requirement because his theory of knowledge is meant to identify precisely those conditions under which knowledge or good reason to believe something is present. If that theory is correct, and he himself fulfills those conditions in his own scientific investigations of human knowledge, he will in fact know that his theory of knowledge is true, or at least he will have good reason to believe it. He studies others and finds that they often satisfy the conditions his theory says are sufficient for knowing things about the world, and he believes that theory, and he believes that he too satisfies those same conditions in his investigations of those other people. He concludes that he does know how human beings know what they do, and he concludes that he therefore understands how he in particular knows the things he knows about the world. He is one of the human beings that his theory is true of. So the non-Cartesian, scientific "externalist" claims to be in a better position than the imagined "externalist" Descartes because he claims to know by a reliable

study of the natural world that his explanation of human knowledge is correct and Descartes's is wrong. In accepting his own explanation he claims to fulfill the conditions his theory asserts to be sufficient for knowing things.

I think this theorist would still be in no better position than the position the imagined "externalist" Descartes is in. If his theory is true, he will in fact know that his explanation is correct. In that sense he could be said to possess an explanation of how human beings know the things they know. In that same sense the imagined "externalist" Descartes would possess an explanation of his knowledge. He accepts something which, if true, would explain his knowledge. But none of this would be any help or consolation to them as epistemologists. The position of the imagined "externalist" Descartes is deficient for the theory of knowledge because he needs some reason to believe that the theory he has devised is true in order to be said to understand how people know the things they think they know. The scientific "externalist" claims he does have reason to believe his explanation of knowledge and so to be in a better position than the imagined "externalist" Descartes. But the way in which he fulfills that condition, even if he does, is only in an "externalist" way, and therefore in the same way that the imagined Descartes fulfills the conditions of knowledge, if he does. *If* the scientific "externalist's" theory is correct about the conditions under which knowledge or reasonable belief is present, and if he does fulfill those conditions in coming to believe his own explanation of knowledge, then he is in fact right in thinking that he has good reason to think that his explanation is correct. But that is to be in the same position with respect to whether he has good reason to think his explanation is correct as the imagined "externalist" Descartes was in at the first level with respect to whether he knows the things he thinks he knows.

It was admitted that if that imagined Descartes's theory were true he would know the things he thinks he knows, but he could not be said to see or to understand himself as possessing such knowledge because he had no reason to think that his theory was true. The scientific "externalist" claims to have good reason to believe that his theory is true. It must be granted that if, in arriving at his theory, he did fulfill the conditions his theory says are sufficient for knowing things about the world, then if that theory is correct, he does in fact know that it is. But still, I want to say, he himself has no reason to think that he does have good reason to think that his theory is correct. He is at best in the position of someone who has good reason to believe his theory if that theory is in fact true, but has no such reason to believe it if some other theory is true instead. He can see what he *would* have good reason to believe if the theory he believes were true, but he cannot see or understand himself as knowing or having good reason to believe what his theory says.

I am aware that describing what I see as the deficiency in this way is not really satisfactory or conclusive. It encourages the "externalist" to re-apply his theory of knowing or having good reason to believe at the next level up, and to claim that he can indeed understand himself to have good reason to believe his theory because he has good reason to believe that he does have good reason to believe his theory. That further belief about his reasons is arrived at in turn by fulfilling what his theory says are the conditions for reasonably believing something. But then he is still in the same position two levels up that we found the imagined "externalist" Descartes to be in at the first level. If the imagined Descartes's claim to self-understanding was inadequate there, any similar claim will be equally inadequate at any higher level of knowing that one knows or having reason to believe that one has reason to believe. That is why our reaction to the original response of the imagined "externalist" Descartes is crucial. Recognition of its inadequacy is essential to recognizing the inadequacy of "externalism" that I have in mind. It is difficult to say precisely what is inadequate about that kind of response, especially in terms that would be acceptable to an "externalist." Perhaps it is best to say that the theorist has to see himself as having good reason to believe his theory in some sense of "having good reason" that cannot be fully captured by an "externalist" account.

So even if it is true that you can know something without knowing that you know it, the philosophical theorist of knowledge cannot simply insist on the point and expect to find acceptance of an "externalist" account of knowledge fully satisfactory. If he could, he would be in the position of someone who says: "I don't know whether I understand human knowledge or not. If what I believe about it is true and my beliefs about it are produced in what my theory says is the right way, I do know how human knowledge comes to be, so in that sense I do understand. But if my beliefs are not true, or not arrived at in that way, I do not. I wonder which it is. I wonder whether I understand human knowledge or not." That is not a satisfactory position to arrive at in one's study of human knowledge — or of anything else.

It might be said that there can be such a thing as unwitting understanding, or understanding you don't know you've got, just as there can be unwitting knowledge, or knowledge you don't know you've got. Such "unwitting understanding," if there is such a thing, is the most that the "externalist" philosophical theorist about human knowledge could be said to have of his own knowledge. But even if there is such a thing, it is not something it makes sense to aspire to, or something to remain content with having reached, if you happen to have reached it. We want witting, not unwitting, understanding. That requires knowing or having some reason to accept the scientific story you believe about how people know the things they know. And in the case of knowledge of the world around us, that would

involve already knowing or having some reason to believe something in the domain in question. Not all the knowledge in that domain would thereby be explained.

I do not mean that there is something wrong with our explaining how people know certain things about the world by assuming that they or we know certain other things about it. We do it all the time. It is only within the general epistemological enterprise that that otherwise familiar procedure cannot give us what we want. And when I say that "externalism" cannot give us what we want I do not mean that it possesses some internal defect which prevents it from being true. The difficulty I am pointing to is an unsatisfactoriness involved in *accepting* an "externalist" theory and claiming to understand human knowledge in general in that way. And even that is too broad. It is not that there is any difficulty in understanding other people's knowledge in those terms. It is only with self-understanding that the unsatisfactoriness or loss of complete generality makes itself felt. "Externalism," if it got the conditions of knowledge right, would work fine for other people's knowledge. As a third-person, observational study of human beings and other animals, it would avoid the obstacles to human understanding apparently involved in the first-person Cartesian project. But the question is whether we can take up such an "external" observer's position with respect to ourselves and our knowledge and still gain a satisfactorily general explanation of how we know the things we know. That is where I think the inevitable dissatisfaction comes in.

The demand for completely general understanding of knowledge in a certain domain requires that we see ourselves at the outset as not knowing anything in that domain and then coming to have such knowledge on the basis of some independent and in that sense prior knowledge or experience. And that leads us to seek a standpoint from which we can view ourselves without taking for granted any of that knowledge that we want to understand. But if we could manage to detach ourselves in that way from acceptance of any truths in the domain we are interested in, it seems that the only thing we could discover from that point of view is that we can never know anything in that domain. We could find no way to explain how that prior knowledge alone could yield any richer knowledge lying beyond it. That is the plight the traditional view captures. That is the truth in skepticism. If we think of our knowledge as arranged in completely general levels of epistemic priority in that way, we find that we cannot know what we think we know. Skepticism is the only answer.

But then that seems absurd. We realize that people do know many things in the domains we are interested in. We can even explain how they know such things, whether they know that they do or not. That is what the third-person point of view captures. That is the truth in "externalism." But when we try to explain how we know those things we find we can

understand it only by assuming that we have got some knowledge in the domain in question. And that is not philosophically satisfying. We have lost the prospect of explaining and therefore understanding all of our knowledge with complete generality.

For these and other reasons I think we need to go back and look more carefully into the very sources of the epistemological quest. We need to see how the almost effortlessly natural ways of thinking embodied in that traditional enterprise nevertheless distort or misrepresent our position, if they do. But we should not think that if and when we come to see how the epistemological enterprise is not fully valid, or perhaps not even fully coherent, we will then possess a satisfactory explanation of how human knowledge in general is possible. We will have seen, at best, that we cannot have any such thing. And that too, I believe, will leave us dissatisfied.¹⁰

NOTES

1. R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, tr. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, (Cambridge, 1985).

2. This charge has been laid against traditional epistemology at least since Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* and is by now, I suppose, more or less philosophical orthodoxy. For more recent expressions of it see, for example, Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief* (Oxford, 1977), and Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979).

3. Perhaps the best example of this, with a list of metaphysical and epistemological "postulates" deemed to be necessary, is B. Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London, 1948). For a more recent version of the same project concentrating only on "epistemic principles" see the epistemological writings of R. Chisholm, e.g., *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1977) or *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis, 1980).

4. See, e.g., I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N. Kemp Smith (New York, 1965), B 19-20.

5. P.F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (London, 1952), pp. 256-257.

6. I have made the point in more detail in my *Hume* (London, 1977), pp. 64-66.

7. See N. Goodman, "The New Riddle of Induction," in *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955).

8. What the mechanism is, how its reliability is to be defined, and what other conditions are necessary vary from one "externalist" theory to another. See, e.g., F. Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), or A. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

9. R. Descartes, "Third Set of Objections with the Author's Replies" and "Author's Replies to the Sixth Set of Objections," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. I, pp. 137, 289, (Cambridge, 1985).

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