What is self-knowledge and how far is it desirable?

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Abstract

Knowledge as a concept has been a central concern of human curiosity as far back as we have records of people's thoughts. What counts as knowledge and what kinds of criteria we can use to establish knowledge, provide the fulcrum for intellectual life. The answers must be inevitably related to the particular world view of a culture and the first part of this article will deal with some of the issues and ways in which they have been dealt with by philosophers in the Western tradition. Subsequent to this discussion of knowledge in general terms, the special case of self-knowledge will be discussed in relation to its correlate, self-deception. As will be shown initially, the viability of mistakes only makes sense if we allow for the possibility of knowledge. So, for individuals, their knowledge of the outside world must always be referential to their knowledge of themselves. How much of this knowledge is tolerable and manageable and therefore how far it is desirable will be seen in relation to this overall thesis.

Keywords: Knowledge, Self, Deception, Many selves

Introduction

Knowledge is a polymorphous concept and there are at least four different, though related, contexts in which we use the verb *to know* and its synonyms. We may say of someone that they know X because;

- they have certain information, or
- they have a certain skill, or
- they are acquainted with X, or
- they have made up their mind, come to a decision about X.

Since there are some important logical differences between these uses of the verb *know*, it is necessary to clarify which is being used on any occasion. Ryle (2009) has referred to the distinction between *knowing how* and *knowing that*, suggesting that various linguistic forms are useful pointers to probable logical differences, but they can be misleading.

Verbs very often refer to acts which people perform and knowledge has been seen by Descartes and others as an 'act of mind'. But knowledge does not seem to have an activity component, it lacks the usual characteristics of doing something like *digging* or *eating*. The activity is in getting to know 'X' (process) rather than in knowing 'X' (result). There seem to be means and methods of acquiring knowledge. Perhaps the difference between knowing X and not knowing X is the difference between certain states of mind, but this does not necessarily follow. With *state of mind* concepts like confidence, one can feel confident and is, therefore, confident. But one can feel one knows X when all too often one does not know X at all. The meaning of the word *knowledge* is not taught ostensively as *state of mind* concepts are, and having knowledge has no characteristic facial expressions.

What is knowledge?

The idea that knowledge is a certain state of mind arose because of a confusion between *confidence* and *certainty*:

To be sure of X is not equivalent *To know X*

A person may feel confident, say 'I know' and yet not really know at all. Not all knowledge-claims are valid. Confidence, but not knowledge, can be misplaced. Many concepts used to describe the mental and moral characteristics of people are tendencies, as they refer to the sorts of things which people often do and achieve, rather than to particular things which they are actually doing or have just achieved, or to the state they are now in. One could not have a habit which one never or hardly ever exhibited, and an increase in a tendency is an increase in

the occasions of its manifestations. Knowledge, however, need never be revealed and increase in knowledge is an increase in the amount we have acquired, not in the occasions on which it is displayed.

There is an interesting and fruitful parallel between tendency concepts and the concept of knowledge. It enables us to see that knowledge, whilst being something that we possess is not something we need to find a storehouse for. It is easy to see that a person who has certain tendencies, certain traits and habits, does not have certain entities that they need to store away when they are not showing them. There is no answer to the question "Where is my courage when I am not being courageous?" Another type of concept common in the description of human and other characteristics is that of a *liability*, which has many things in common with tendencies – neither refers to anything actually happening. Sometimes liabilities and tendencies have been taken to be the same, but to say of someone that they do X whenever Y happens (tendency) is not the same as saying that they would do X if Y happens (liability). The second follows from the first but not the first from the second. Liabilities need not in fact happen, just as one need never, under any circumstances, yield knowledge.

Resembling both liability and tendency concepts are those which specify an ability. Ability concepts which can be actions we try to perform or are a result one wishes to reach, are not activities themselves, nor are they states of mind. Abilities do not take up space in the brain any more than a car's ability to do 100 kmph is under its bonnet over and above the engine etc. Like knowledge, we speak of abilities only where there is the idea of success, where there is a built-in notion of achievement. The four senses of *know* outlined earlier – skill, information, acquaintance and decision – all involve the notion of correctness. The possession of knowledge is equivalent to the possession of the ability to get things right.

- What are the various things we are commonly said to know?
- Can what we know be seen in terms of abilities?

The skill sense of *know* implies the ability to do the right thing appropriately, as in a game of chess or a French conversation. If a person really knows, or only think they know, then the acid test is to get them to demonstrate their knowledge by solving problems appropriate to their field and then checking that they succeed equally well in other changed circumstances, so as to rule out the first correct response being due to chance alone.

The information sense of *know* is the commonest form. It implies that to know something is to be in possession of certain information, to have the facts of the matter, to have got to the truth. One displays possession of facts by telling them and one displays possession of skills by performing them. The ability to produce knowledge is the only evidence that we have knowledge. Having the ability to give the answer is a logically necessary sufficient condition of knowing it. To acquire knowledge is to acquire the ability to produce it. It doesn't have to be kept anywhere because knowledge is not an entity, in much the same way that music from a musical box comes from the movement of the mechanism when the mechanism stops, the music stops – it doesn't go somewhere else.

The acquaintance sense of *know* is like personal knowledge which is based on coming into direct and personal contact with people, places and things, or coming to know them by reputation. Knowledge gained by acquaintance is not necessarily different from other kinds of knowledge just because it is acquired in this way. The decision sense of *know* in the case of whether a person knows what to do or not depends solely on them making up their mind. The ability is to tell what you intend to do.

Skills are acquired by practice, while knowledge of people is acquired by acquaintance or description, and truths are acquired by observation and reasoning. This does not imply differential value to these forms of knowledge just because they are acquired in different ways. Whatever sort of expressly stated information can be said to be believed or not, we cannot say that someone believes how to ride a bike or believes the names of the Kings and Queens of England or does not believe what to do or believes a place etc. Believing a person is not an exception, since this is not contrasted with knowing him, but is short for believing what he says to be true. Therefore, knowledge in the information sense and belief do operate in the same way or have the same sorts of objects. This apparently obvious conclusion, however, has been hotly contested by philosophers as different as Plato on the one hand and Hume and the logical positivists on the other. All these philosophers have insisted that knowledge is confined to a much narrower class of things than is belief.

Knowledge vs beliefs

Plato in his *Republic* (357 BC/2012), held as a general thesis, that we cannot ordinarily say that something is absolutely or entirely so-and-so. For instance, a man who is small relative to an elephant is large relative to an insect, and so on. Only smallness itself is absolutely small. In Plato's view it is apparent that we can only properly say to *know* that X is Y if X is necessarily Y. If X could also be Z (that is, something that is not Y), then we can only be said to *believe* that X is Y. This is precisely the position taken by Hume (1748/2011) and the logical positivists (eg. Ayer, 2001). For they held that only necessarily true or analytic statements – what Hume called 'relations depending solely on ideas' – can be said to be known; while synthetic, or empirical statements can at best be believed to be true. Many different arguments have been advanced for this thesis, but they all assume as a

principle the conclusion to be proved, namely that one cannot know something that might be false.

This principle has been confused with another (which is correct) that it makes no sense to say that someone knows what is false. If the earth is round no one can ever have known, no matter how fervently and reasonably they believed it, that the earth is flat. But to say that someone cannot know what is false is not the same as saying that one cannot know what might be or could be false. The two principles are easily confused. Philosophers have devoted their energies to showing, quite correctly, that any empirical statement might be false and have then concluded (incorrectly) that we cannot say of any such statement that they are true. What the misconceived principle says is that "if X might be false, then X must be false" and cannot ever be construed as true. It is obviously a mistake to suppose that only what must be true can be known, though it must be the case that if anything is known then it is true.

The sceptic will say, for instance, that nobody can know what has happened or will happen unless and until they are present when it happens, or that no one can know what another is suffering unless they are suffering it too, or that no one can know any empirical statement to be true, or that no one can know anything for which they themselves can provide a proof. The sceptics usually win a hearing for their argument that we can never know that we are being deceived, by pointing out how often and how easily we have been deceived. But to admit that mistakes have been made is to admit that there are cases where we know something to be true. The supposition that whatever we did, we might be making a mistake, contains a contradiction. Mistakes must logically be contrasted with what are not mistakes, but one could not know whether something was a mistake without knowing what it would be like for it not to be a mistake. An example of this error would be the supposition that all the coinage of a country could be counterfeit, for to say a coin is counterfeit is to contrast it with genuine coinage. If the country had minted no genuine coinage, crooks could forge no counterfeit money (Ryle 1954). The supposition that everything might be a mistake is, therefore, untenable.

Self knowledge

Having established the case for the possibility of knowledge, a further conceptual muddle discussed across the centuries by philosophers is that form of knowledge known as *self-knowledge*. Knowledge, by definition, implies a knower and in the case of self-knowledge, knower and known are the same, that is oneself. This apparent dualism has given rise to the problem of each one of us having a private inner life and a separate world experienced through the senses (Raban, 2020).

This is partly a trick of linguistic usage where 'I' and 'my' in sentences are reflexive. If I say "I hurt my leg yesterday", the *ghost in the machine* is implied by the 'I' who does all the experiencing and the 'my leg' which is the object of the experience. I could equally say "my leg hurt yesterday" (and, perhaps, still does). This linguistic trick can be seen more clearly in other contexts where, for example, we refer to business conducted between the university and the senate. It is not the case that the university is another institution besides the senate and the faculty boards etc. But when a person asks "who or what am I?" they do not necessarily ask for a list of personal details, but query their uniqueness. The more the question is asked, the more difficult and mystifying the 'I' becomes. Perhaps this is not just a linguistic quirk, but also related to our linguistic heritage which emphasises the value and prominence of an objective (as opposed to subjective) reality.

Just as the concept of knowledge has been dealt with from the point of view of the Western tradition, this world view will also colour the way in which the concept of *self* is approached. This qualification is a necessary one as any conceptual analysis can sound dogmatic, but it must always be seen as a way of making sense of life with reference to a particular preferred or chosen point of view. Too often we are unaware of this proviso and humans have sometimes become intolerant to the point of persecution when world views between individuals or communities have been incompatible.

Ruddock (1972) invites us to consider what has been said, and is being said, about humans: their nature is said to be divine, God is with them, or they are in God, or they are creatures guided by rational self-interest, their nature is social, their nature is anti-social, they are animals driven by instinctual forces. Alternatively, they are a machine, a probability-programmed computer, a homeostatic cybernetic system, a hierarchically organised stimulus-response system, or an uncharacterised and unintelligible existent, or they are a social construct, a cultural and historical product, or humans are a fallen or alienated caricature of man, or they do not yet exist being their own project.

Jeeves (1976; 2006) states that these different concepts of human beings are not merely of speculative interest, for they have speculative consequences. They have governed different systems of ethics. Human nature is linked to human destiny, that is to say with goods to be chosen and pursued, evils to be recognised and avoided, heaven and hell. Kluckhohn and Murray (1971) have pointed out that everyone is in certain respects;

- like all other people
- like some other people, and
- like no other people.

It is with special regard to these descriptions that the concept of self takes on significance as an area of study. Gergen (1971) details some main areas of concern through which an individual must develop towards maturity. The way in which someone conceives of themselves, their identity, for instance, will influence both what they choose to do and what they expect from life. So will the value they put on themselves (self-esteem), and the way in which they adapt to the society of which they are a part. It is interesting to note the observation of the cultural anthropologist Lee (1959). She pointed out that among the Wintu Indians of North Carolina, there is no word for *Self.* Grammatical analysis reveals that the Wintu do have a conception of self. but no clear delineation between self and the environment or other persons.

Goffman (1999), studied in fine detail the selection of self that is to be presented in a social situation from one's total resources. How the presentation is staged and performed, how the performance relates to an assumed role and that situation, and the degree of identification between the person and their role. Goffman takes the view that identity is *formed* by role. He claims it is a basic assumption of role analysis that each individual will be involved in more than one system or pattern and, therefore, perform more than one role. Each individual, therefore, will have several selves, providing us with the interesting problem of how these selves are related.

It is true that most of us feel ourselves to be somewhat different in different roles, but not absolutely. There is a central sense in which we feel ourselves to be more than a thread of memory on which roles are strung. Objectively, we observe behaviour changes in others as they move from role to role, but not to the extent that we think of them as different people. There is a sense in which everyone is in certain respects like no one else, they are like themselves. If we take Goffman's perspective, who are we when we are on our own or asleep?

Laing, Phillipson and Lee (1972) explored identity-for-the-other and identity-for-oneself in a sequence of perspectives. They acknowledge the origin of the analysis which is that developed by Martin Buber (1923/1970), where he asks;

> … imagine two people, whose life is dominated by appearances, sitting and talking together. Call them Peter and Paul. Let us list the different configurations which are involved. First, there is Peter as he wishes to appear to Paul, and Paul as he wishes to appear to Peter. Then, there is Peter as he really appears to Paul, that is Paul's image of Peter, which in general does not in the least coincide with what Peter wishes Paul to see; and similarly, there is the reverse of the situation. Further, there is Peter as he appears to himself, and Paul as he appears to himself. Lastly, there are the bodily Peter and the bodily Paul, two living beings and six ghostly appearances, which mingle in many ways in the conversations between the two. (no page nos.)

This kind of analysis has indeed given Laing a fruitful area of investigation in his therapeutic work (1972). In unravelling some of this, Laing has enabled his patients to understand and come to terms with their feelings of conflict and confusion. The one living body and the three ghostly appearances assigned to each above must not lead us to despair of dealing with the self as a whole, as a unity. Indeed, becoming a person is centrally concerned with the integration of these disparities. To say one thing and do another, to break promises, to take contradictory attitudes from day to day, is to invite alienation. The various modes of adaptation and integration will characterise the person, The subjective aspect of this achievement is a growing sense of identity and the need to develop and discover a viable identity is fundamental in the sense that other choices depend on it.

The experience of being alive can vary from 'feeling at home in one's body' when the physical self is in general harmony with self-perception and other's perception of self, to a feeling of 'dis-harmony' which is stressful. We all tend to overcome this feeling of stress and conflict in many ways, and in fact it is vital that we do so to stabilise our behaviour and our feeling of wellbeing. There are many mechanisms which the person uses to re-establish this equilibrium, most notably that of defence, detailed extensively in the pioneering work of Freud (1936/2019).

Self-conflict and deceit

A disturbing and fascinating study which highlights this mechanism at work is that of Stanley Milgram (Blass, 2009; Milgram, 2019). Subjects were invited into the laboratories at Yale University Psychology Department and required to conduct a paired-associate learning task. The subject read a series of word pairs to the learner, and then read the first word of one of the pairs followed by four terms. The learner was to indicate which of the four terms had originally been paired with the first word. The subject could not see the learner, only their responses were known. The subject was instructed to give the learner an electric shock for each wrong answer, and progress to the next item. Each further wrong answer was followed by an increasing voltage in the electric shock, past the point of electrocution. Needless to say, the shock generator was not attached to the learner, though the shrieks would lead the subjects to feel sure that it was. The most surprising result was the fact that the individual subjects did comply with the authority of the experimenter and continued to give electric shocks of increasing voltage. Naturally

concerned about what they were doing, many subjects reported stress and conflict. They felt that what they were doing was wrong, but were being told to go ahead. As long as the subject could be sure that responsibility was given over to the experimenter and did not reside in them, they were able to grudgingly continue.

All Milgram's subjects were re-assured at the end of the experiment that, in fact, no harm had been done, and they were free to discuss their own feelings experienced during the experiment. Milgram's analysis of these reports pointed out that it was not only important that a person 'look good' (or save face) in front of others, but they must look good to themselves. Tempted to perform distasteful actions, an individual may assess its consequences and refrain. But when the action does not stem from motives which are their own, and which no longer reflect their self-image, then there are no consequences felt for self-conception. Indeed, the subjects' reports frequently reflected an opposition between what was wished on the one hand with what was required on the other. The action was seen as alien to the person's nature, even though they performed it.

While the obedient subject shifts responsibility for shocking the learner onto the experimenter, those who disobeyed accepted responsibility for disrupting the experiment. In disobeying, the subject believed they had ruined the experiment, thwarted the purpose of the scientist and proved inadequate for the task assigned to them. It was the disobedient subjects who experienced responsibility for their actions. Milgram notes the outrage and concern expressed by audiences of college students when he lectured on this topic, and how they felt that they would not have complied with the experimenter's requests, and yet within months these same young men were fighting for democracy and dropping bombs and napalm on hundreds and thousands of people. These Milgram refers to as actions carried out by people just like everyone else, who have been transformed by authority, and have consequently relinquished all sense of individual responsibility for their actions. Lang (2010) cites the commandants of Nazi concentration camps during WW !! as an example of people who must have known their actions in killing large numbers of Jews was wrong but went ahead with their orders. Milgram's experiments are now considered unethical: (https://milligram.weebly.com/ethical-problems.html).

However, it seems, on the basis of Milgram's analysis, that total self-knowledge is an unrealistic and unrealisable objective. In another sense of the concept, self-deception has been analysed by Fingarette (2000). He points out that in order to deceive one must know that that is just what one is doing, to be deceived is not to know this. How can the deceiver and the deceived be the same person? As deceiver, one is insincere and guilty, as genuinely deceived one is the innocent victim; the self-deceiver is both agent and acted upon. This need not be such an ambiguity normally except in this special case where the agent has access to information which the acted upon does not, and if the acted upon did have the information, there could be no deception.

Clearly, the theoretical and empirical work of Freud (ibid)and the experimental evidence presented by Milgram, indicate that the felt needs of the individual conflict with any realisation of the person integrating as a whole single entity. The paradox remains that a person is both one self and many selves at once. We have knowledge of ourselves in the information sense in respect of our ability to say where we were yesterday, where we went to school, or on our holidays (Raban, 2020, p. 32). In terms of skills and we have knowledge concerning our ability to behave in certain ways, for instance, to be kind or unkind more often than not. We acquire knowledge of ourselves which may be in conflict with other knowledge we already know we have. Conflicting evidence is dealt with either by ignoring it or re-constituting our understanding. It is in this sense that history can be changed, where evidence is interpreted and re-interpreted to reach a different understanding.

Conclusion

The implications of a concept analysis of knowledge still leaves us with the reification of knowledge as if it were a once and for all thing. It implies that there is something out there (or in here) which becomes known by a knower. But it seems that the very activity of knowing can in some sense change the information. The fact that we share a publicly communicable range of 'knowledge' does not give us any right to suppose that knowers have exactly corresponding understandings. Probably, the very activity of understanding is essentially a process whereby two things at least are happening;

- the knower incorporates evidence into their intellectual and emotional frameworks
- the knower's framework itself is both altered by fresh evidence and altering the evidence as it does so.

The intellectual and emotional framework itself is not given in the situation, but rather develops and changes over the lifetime of the individual. This will be part of the process illustrated in the dot points above. Kubie (1961) questions the effective value of knowledge of externals in the absence of equally deep personal insight, that can be seen in terms of self-knowledge in relation to the intellectual and emotional framework which constitutes the self. Kubie asks if there can be wisdom even about the objective world around us, considering the power of our projections (in the psychoanalytic sense) in the absence of wisdom about ourselves from which these projections arise. I take it that Kubie is here referring to the framework referred to above. It is his conviction that education

without this self-knowledge can never lead to wisdom and maturity, and that self-knowledge in depth is a process that, like education itself, is never complete or total. In every one of us, throughout our lives, there are aspects of ourselves which tend repeatedly to confuse and obscure our perception of inner and outer reality, and without effort and attempts to overcome or come to terms with these possibilities, knowledge will be filtered through glasses which constantly distort our vision.

It remains true that to know oneself has deep and troubling significance. If self-knowledge leads to dissonance within the system of sub-selves, as the subjects in Milgram's experiment show, then mechanisms must function which hide or rationalise disparate behaviour. If we can tolerate the stress and feelings of alienation which total self-knowledge must provoke then we are promised the fruits of eternal wisdom, if our cultural heritage is Eastern in origin, or an eternal ridicule and/or hospitalisation, if our cultural heritage is Western. Given an ideological framework which gives us a means of cutting up the pie of experience, we must decide whether to be true to ourselves alone or to ourselves in relation to our context of life. As no one of us is an island, and we live in communities not only of many selves, but composed of other people, we need to extend the range of shared assumptions which will enable a variety of personal growth patterns, whilst realising its futility.

And a man said,
> Speak to us of *self-knowledge* and he answered, saying:
> Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and nights …
> … And seek not the depths of your knowledge with staff or sounding line.
> For self is a sea boundless and measureless …
> … The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals.

The Prophet by Gibran **(2020)**

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