

## Knowledge and Certainty

There has been a number of questions regarding knowledge. Most center on what constitutes knowledge? Plato wrote the first comprehensive discussion on the matter, yet it seems to have been overlooked for centuries. Beginning with Descartes and continuing throughout the Enlightenment and Modernism, there was a lengthy resurrection of the discussion in Plato's *Theaetetus* as philosophers meticulously considered its arguments over a span of many years as opposed to the one night of dialog that Plato's Socrates underwent. Arguably, there was little difference in the unfolding discussion in Modernism and Plato's original dialog. That changed with Wittgenstein. In some ways, Wittgenstein entertained parts of Plato's dialog, but then extended them. Wittgenstein's main contribution dealt with certainty—an issue which it appears Plato skirted. This was defined as “I am incapable of being wrong about that,”<sup>1</sup> or in other words: being right without ever being wrong even though it is possible to be wrong. From this, it will be shown that, if knowledge must include this certainty, the possibility of someone possessing this will be impossible. Furthermore, it will be shown that even if knowledge excludes certainty, it will be still be legendary.

In order to understand this claim, we must first understand its origins, which are found primarily in Plato's dialogs. The first third of the *Theaetetus* deals with the relationship between knowledge and perception, which is the focus of both Descartes and the empiricists. What is most striking is that these Modernists do not go as far in their thoughts as Plato does. They all stop at the notion that a person is correct about his own perceptions, but Plato rejects this on the grounds that it makes knowledge subjective and, consequently, beyond the realm of falsifiability. This kind of knowledge, while incorrigible, is truth for no man. Given two people with a

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<sup>1</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper, 1969) 16.

difference of perception, neither one can be certain he is right and the other wrong. In other words, everyone is right and incapable of being wrong, but that is because there can be no “wrong” and not because there is some kind of certainty. Wittgenstein echoes these words when speaking of private languages: “Look at the blue of the sky and say to yourself 'How blue the sky is!'--When you do it spontaneously—without philosophical intentions—the idea never crosses your mind that this impression of colour belongs only to *you*.”<sup>2</sup> Everyone expects all others to understand what one implies when uttering a particular expression: “Imagine someone saying: 'But I know how tall I am!' and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it.”<sup>3</sup> As such, there is agreement among most philosophers that there must be some kind of criteria; With Plato and Wittgenstein, this must be beyond one's self-justification/circular argument if there is to be any kind of knowledge that is more than a mere private language. We shall see that for this criteria to be meaningful, knowledge will have to be beyond human understanding.

## *II. The Mark of Knowledge*

In his *Meditations*, Descartes argues that for something to constitute knowledge, it must have some level of certainty. In his own words, Descartes seeks to follow in Archimedes's footsteps and have “nothing but a point that be firm and immovable in order that he might move the entire earth from its place.”<sup>4</sup> For Descartes, this is found in the fact that regardless of one's thought, that one must exist in order to think. This is Descartes's unmovable foundation through which he finds enough certainty to proclaim that all one perceives must be taken as knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, because one's perceptions are true, Descartes argues that the objects of one's perceptions must also be true. Later, Berkeley was quick to find flaws in this argument and

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<sup>2</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001): 275.

<sup>3</sup>*Philosophical Investigations* 279.

<sup>4</sup>Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1992) II.1.

<sup>5</sup>This is found primarily in the Second Meditation.

created a more refined criteria for knowledge. This new argument still accepts perception as knowledge, but rejects any kind of correspondence to some external reality. On the heels of Berkeley, Hume reformulated the argument once again and restricted this perceptual knowledge to the immediate present, arguing against anything temporally distant, such as past memories and future plans.

Yet these criteria is still insufficient for both Plato and Wittgenstein. For them, all perceptions should be doubted and with good cause. If knowledge remained simply one's perceptions, then knowledge amounts to very little as the universality of this knowledge makes it nothing for everyone. Saying something as simple as “[this](#) is red” would ultimately be meaningless to anyone but the speaker. Thus, Plato seeks to reject knowledge as being some form of perception as it has no way of asserting truth. Yet there must be some form of knowledge that allows an assertion to be verified as (true) knowledge or not. Wittgenstein suggests that “‘I know’ is supposed to express a relation, not between me and the sense of a proposition (like ‘I believe’) but between me and a fact.”<sup>6</sup> Assuming this is true, then it follows that for knowledge to be knowledge, the object (i.e. fact) must be verified as true. This verification is where the difficulty lies with certainty. It seems that the only methods of verification rely either on other possible objects of knowledge (i.e. other “facts”) or on doubt. Yet here is the problem: if it is the former, then we are relying on the verification on the other objects and slowly create a massive system of coherence lacking any *external* verification. If the latter case is more accurate, then we have already assumed that the certainty of the object in question already exists and, consequently, we are relying on the verification of that certainty. This places the knower in the same place as the first case: lacking *external* verification. As such,

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<sup>6</sup>*On Certainty*, 90.

if knowledge requires its object to be verified as true, it seems we are left without any kind of verification process that exists *a priori*.

There is still one last hope to have certainty with knowledge: judgments. In his *Theaetetus*, Plato addresses this issue of knowledge. Instead of conceiving knowledge as perception, we should try thinking of knowledge in terms of judgment (or opinion). It seems logical to assume that false judgments cannot be considered knowledge because they are like one thinking the things he knows to be things he doesn't know or thinking things he doesn't know to be things he does know.<sup>7</sup> According to Plato, false judgments are thus impossible; and we should consequently restrict ourselves to true judgments. After some discussion in the dialog, Plato's Socrates concludes that persuading someone is equivalent to causing that person to judge (e.g. a jury) but also that there are cases where a person can form a true judgment yet do so without knowledge (e.g. a court trial where there are no eyewitness accounts). In that case, then, knowledge cannot be construed as true judgment. As one last attempt to describe knowledge, Plato tries knowledge as “true judgment with an account,”<sup>8</sup> which appears to be similar to contemporary foundationalist theories of knowledge (e.g. Justified True Belief). In broad strokes, both Plato's last attempt and these theories raise the criteria for knowledge to the level of a true account with adequate justification. This justification is, unfortunately, nothing more than an additional judgment. As such, this definition of knowledge falters as it becomes a self-justification / circular argument.

### *III. On Incorrigibility*

Since it seems futile to narrowly define knowledge, it may be better to discuss it in terms of right and wrong. The Modernists' reliance on what is called incorrigibility—that is, the notion

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<sup>7</sup>Myles Burnyeat, *The Theaetetus of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990) 188c.

<sup>8</sup>*Theaetetus*, 201d.

that one cannot be mistaken about one's immediate perceptions—created a definition of knowledge that allows everyone to have some level of knowledge without the possibility of being wrong. If one perceives *this* as red, one cannot be wrong about that. Put simply, knowledge was construed as simply “not being wrong,” but this also made knowledge something one could not “be right” about. There is no way to judge whether or not a particular perception was correct because there was no measure of correctness beyond the individual perception. A second view was that of objectivity. Could one be “right” about something while having the possibility of being wrong? This can be seen in Plato's dialog as “right opinions” whereby knowledge required some level of justification. The difficulty with this view was that even the justification was just another piece of knowledge. Is there any view of knowledge that is specific enough so that it corresponds directly with truth (i.e. one only knows true things) and yet simple enough that there is some chance of achieving it? In other words, is there a way to “be right” without ever “being wrong” even though it is possible? Both Perception and right judgment have failed the task.

Wittgenstein states that all beliefs are ultimately groundless.<sup>9</sup> Does this (or should it) give rise to rejecting objectivity? What is objectivity? Is it a belief without any doubt (i.e. with certainty)? Wittgenstein seems to suggest that certainty is a subjective acceptance of particular things as sure evidence.<sup>10</sup> Rethinking Hume's questions on cause and effect, Wittgenstein remarks “Strange coincidence, that every man whose skull has been opened had a brain!”<sup>11</sup> If the grounding of knowledge is truth, then no causal relationships (e.g. the rising of the sun, gravity, etc) can be regarded as true because of their continual observance. Additionally, no sense perception can be regarded as true because *I* perceived it. In fact, even if one were to test that

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<sup>9</sup>*On Certainty* 166.

<sup>10</sup>*On Certainty* 194.

<sup>11</sup>*On Certainty* 207.

perception twenty times (or if twenty others tested the perception), it would be no truer than before. Wittgenstein argues that all justifications are simply further refinements of the language game and not necessarily indicative of any objectivity: “What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic. It belongs to the description of the language-game.”<sup>12</sup> Without any simple way of justifying a belief as knowledge, what is left?

#### *IV. Bound Together*

Plato seems to provide a plausible answer to our difficulty with knowledge and certainty in the *Meno*. At the end of the dialog, Socrates describes knowledge and right judgments in terms of the images of Daedalus. These are statues prone to walking off like runaway slaves. Likewise, a single judgment is prone to disappearing, unless it is anchored down. Yet this is still not enough for Plato, because a single piece of knowledge not as good as the whole of knowledge. For Plato, then, these statues (right opinions) all need to be anchored together and in place by recollection. Once chained in this way, “in the first place they turn into knowledge, and in the second, are abiding. And this is why knowledge is more prized than right opinion: the one transcends the other by its trammels.”<sup>13</sup> Earlier in the dialog, Plato expanded upon his notion of recollection. This is described as one already having right opinion in hiding which, through one being asked questions, awakens and becomes knowledge.<sup>14</sup> The two parts of his dialog are closely related as they seem to explain the other. Yet, there is still the problem of subjectivity in this view of knowledge. Thus far, knowledge is still something subjective and, consequently, unable to “be right” for anyone other than the subject. For Plato, this is resolved in acknowledging the Forms which must be perfect and unmoving. As a result, Plato agrees on some level with Parmenides with regards to meta-physical things, which seems to be the only

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<sup>12</sup>*On Certainty* 82.

<sup>13</sup>Plato, *Meno*, 98a.

<sup>14</sup>*Meno*, 86a.

things about which one can have right opinion. Sense perceptions have been completely removed from the realm of knowledge for Plato.

For Wittgenstein, the answer lies in behaviors and language games. With knowledge comes doubt. It is impossible for there to be doubt about  $X$  until there is some knowledge of  $X$ . Along with this doubt, there must be something taken for certain—some hinges on which the door revolves. The very behavior of doubt has already assumed certainty on a number of things: the words being used, their correspondence to the object(s) in question, and a method of verification. When one tests the proposition “I know that this is a hand,” one rarely doubts that one is seeing *something*. As a result, knowledge must be grounded in acknowledgment.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond that, it cannot be subjective for Wittgenstein:

*If there were a dispute whether one could have a pain in such and such a part of the body, then someone who just then had a pain in that spot might say: 'I assure you, I have a pain there now.' But it would sound odd if Moore had said: 'I assure, I know that's a tree.' A personal experience simply has no interest for us here.*<sup>16</sup>

We are now left with two pieces which Wittgenstein wraps together in his theory of certainty/knowledge: acknowledgment and a rejection of subjectivity. With these, it seems that Wittgenstein is heading towards inter-subjectivity as a criteria for knowledge. This is an echo of Hume's idea of customs, which he regarded as “a principle of human nature, which is universally acknowledged.”<sup>17</sup>

#### *V. Knowledge as Inter-subjective*

Both Plato and Wittgenstein have concluded with roughly parallel arguments on knowledge and it is time to reconcile them. Taking the arguments from the Modernists, Plato,

<sup>15</sup>On *Certainty* 378.

<sup>16</sup>On *Certainty* 389.

<sup>17</sup>Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 336.

and Wittgenstein, we can see that knowledge isn't something common like sense-experience. These philosophers all want knowledge to be something prized like a rare jewel. Progressively, enough reasons were given to doubt a correspondence between what we can label internal perceptions and external sense-experiences, perceptions about the past/memory, perceptions about cause and effect, perceptions about the future, and finally all perceptions. Consequently, nothing experienced could be counted as knowledge. Anything that relied on subjectivity was removed from the realm of knowledge, lest we return to Heraclitus's notion of motion.

The battlefield of knowledge did not find rest there either. Next, casualties included even unexperienced concepts such as mathematics. Even Plato's Forms were under attack. Without a way of justifying these ideals, they are nothing more than mere rules to a language game. Plato's Forms, at some level, requires some kind of perception of them and/or a judgment comparing some object with these Forms. While the Forms themselves may be regarded as knowledge, human understanding must still perceive them for them to be of any practical use. As such, we are still left with subjective perception, but what would make this perception acceptable or certain? We have little to no reason for presuming this, unless we acknowledge these Forms universally, but this still would not necessitate certainty. As a result, if certainty is to be maintained, it cannot hold hands with anything considered "objective."

The last hope for some kind of certainty or knowledge rests in between these two extremes, if there is any. It seems that both Plato and Wittgenstein *hint* at this middle ground, but never explicitly acknowledge it. This is the locus of inter-subjectivity. Strictly speaking, it is a pragmatic approach in that a proposition is true if it is acknowledged by most people. Consequently, this means then that truth and knowledge change over time. Concepts such as flat earth and the geocentric model would have been considered true knowledge a millenium ago, but

not any more. Furthermore, concepts such as “There is such and such a person living at such and such a place” would be harder to define with certainty if, for example, the location and person are very obscure. This is because most people would not *care* whether or not that statement is true. Consequently, it would seem that the only things someone could have certainty about are the things being taught to them and little else; one's own existence could be doubted unless one was an internationally known star. Therefore, it seems that certainty, defined in any way, has to be rejected in order for any knowledge to be possible. Without certainty, knowledge would lack any kind of *external* verification. As a result, even removing certainty still locks knowledge into being beyond human understanding.

As such, knowledge is something so elusive that, if it exists, we humans are unable to reach it in any meaningful gesture. It has been shown that as philosophers have made the criteria for knowledge more difficult, knowledge has slowly slipped through our fingers. We are now at the point where concepts such as certainty, doubt, and knowledge have all but lost their meaning. Wittgenstein has shown us that we cannot have a doubt without some certainty or knowledge. Plato has shown us that we cannot have certainty without knowledge. And the reconciliation between the two has shown that we cannot have knowledge if we do not have both doubt and certainty. It may be best to revert back to an older conception of knowledge so that when one states “I know how tall I am,” others can agree and move on to things more meaningful to their lives.