
> Part 1

Knowers and knowing

> Chapter 1

Who is the knower?

LEARNING INTENTIONS

This chapter will address the question of the knower and what the knower brings to the task of knowing.

You will:

- examine your own knowledge and sense of self, consider what shapes you as a knower and understand how you can overestimate and underestimate your personal knowledge.
- learn how to discuss the self in relation to tribalism, and become aware of the importance of knowledge communities for personal identity.
- learn how to discuss objectivity and subjectivity.
- understand the difference between relativity and relativism, and their implications.
- consider the role of 'common sense' for the knower.

1 Who is the knower?

BEFORE YOU START

Analyse each of the following quotations and discuss the questions that follow.

- 1 'The things that make me different are the things that make me.' **A. A. Milne** (1882–1956)
- 2 'If I speak of myself in different ways, that is because I look at myself in different ways.'
Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592)
- 3 'When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.' **Lao Tzu** (6th century BCE)
- 4 'Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.' **Aristotle** (384–322 BCE)
- 5 'To go wrong in one's own way is better than to go right in someone else's.'
Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881)

For each quotation, consider:

- a To what extent do you agree or disagree with the quotation?
- b How might you challenge the quotation?
- c What assumptions underlying the quotation can you identify?
- d Does the quotation challenge or affirm your own perspective on who you are?
- e To what extent does your answer to question d depend on your answer to question a?

1.1 Introduction

REAL-LIFE SITUATION 1.1

- 1 To what extent can you know yourself?
- 2 In what contexts is it possible for others to know you better than you know yourself?

The question of who is the knower has occupied the minds of philosophers and other great thinkers for thousands of years, and is perhaps no closer to a definitive answer than it has ever been. Yet if we cannot know who we are as knowers, how can we begin to know anything? You might want to say, '*I know who I am. When I look in the mirror, I see me*', but every time you look in the mirror, you see a different 'you'. Are you the same person now that you were when you were five years old? And will you be the same person when you are 60 or even by the end of today? How will you know?

More importantly, in the context of Theory of Knowledge (TOK), we will look at what it is that each of us as an individual knower brings to the process of knowing, how we might contribute to the pool of knowledge that humankind has access to, and how we can best try to avoid deceiving ourselves or being deceived by others. In the course of this chapter, and throughout the book, you will be encouraged to examine where your current knowledge comes from, and what has influenced you to think the way that you do. You will also be challenged to identify and question some of your assumptions and **biases**, and to raise your awareness of the extent to which you are shaped by what you know.

KEY WORD

bias: prejudice, unfairness, favouritism



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1.2 The knower as an individual

REAL-LIFE SITUATION 1.2

To what extent are you still the same person that you were before you began the TOK course?

Who are you? said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present—at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.

What do you mean by that? said the Caterpillar, sternly. Explain yourself!

I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir, said Alice, because I am not myself, you see.

Lewis Carroll (1832–1898), *Alice in Wonderland*.

Outside of philosophy, 'personal **identity**' usually refers to the features a person defines themselves by, or that make them 'who they are'. For example, you might choose to identify yourself as an Inuit who loves psy-trance music, a vegan football player, an avid horse-riding enthusiast or perhaps you see yourself as a future engineer with a passion for design. We all have multiple characteristics by which we might choose to identify ourselves including (but not limited to) our age, gender identity, nationality, physical characteristics, sexual orientation, dietary choices, culture, politics, religion, hobbies and preferred school subjects.

Interestingly, just because you have a characteristic does not mean you will choose to identify with that characteristic. Just because you come from Tahiti does not necessarily mean that you identify as being Tahitian, or you may be a talented pianist but do not particularly regard yourself as a musician. It is also possible that you may choose to identify yourself with a characteristic you do not actually have. For example, you might think of yourself as a singer, even if you are actually tone deaf.

Our personal identity, in this sense, is largely **contingent**, and changeable. Our ethnicity and ancestry may be fixed, but almost everything else that we identify ourselves by may change. We express certain aspects of the **culture** and communities we belong to, but we might also challenge those norms and actively shape our culture in new ways.

David Hume (1711–1776) regarded the self as nothing more than a 'bundle of perceptions'. He famously said, 'When I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a **perception** and never can observe anything but the perception.' (David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*.)

DISCUSS 1.1

- 1 Do you think David Hume was right? Can you 'catch' or perceive yourself without any perceptions?
- 2 What might this mean in terms of your self-understanding?

KEY WORDS

identity: how a person, group or nation sees themselves in relation to other people, groups, nations, ideas, and the world

contingent: only true under certain conditions, and dependent on other things

culture: the shared ideas, beliefs, customs and practices of a community or society

perception: an awareness of something in and through the mind

1 Who is the knower?

Many psychologists – and many of us – take the self as some kind of fundamental core reality very seriously. We live in an age in which self-identity and self-esteem are regarded as crucial to our health and well-being. At the same time, we are encouraged to take part in self-improvement programmes, and the ‘selfie’ is perhaps the fastest-growing genre in photography. Indeed, there seems to be a contemporary obsession with portraying ourselves in particular ways on social media. We may feel under pressure to show ourselves as having a particular look or living a particular lifestyle, when the reality may be rather different.

REAL-LIFE SITUATION 1.3

To what extent are our self-image and feelings of self-esteem a reflection of the ways in which others view us, the ways we *think* others view us or the ways we see ourselves?



Figure 1.1: Selfies are a growing genre

EXPLORE 1.1

Write a page about yourself. What it is about you that makes you who you are?

Once you have written about yourself, analyse your work. If you were to take out everything that relates you to other people (e.g., ‘*I am Mbongi’s sister*’, or ‘*I belong to the Ng family*’, or ‘*I am Miguel’s best friend*’), where you come from or what you do, how much would be left? How much of what you have written do you think will *always* be true of you? How much might be different in one year? How much might be different in ten years? How much might be different in 50 years?

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CONTINUED

Look back on your description after a week. What, if anything, might you want to add or subtract from your self-description? What might this say about you as a knower?

Self-assessment

How well were you able to capture who you believe yourself to be in the writing activity? Is there anything you have missed? Did you take into account factors that have shaped you, and how you have learnt what you know?

The knower's perspective

All of us, as knowers, bring our own **perspective** to every situation – from the people and places we like to the political opinions we hold. If you think back to the things you liked or disliked when you were very young, you would probably have very different opinions of them now. (Very few IB Diploma Programme students would regard *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* as one of their favourite songs, for example, although it is a great favourite for many young children.)

As our perspectives change, so too do our tastes and opinions. The more we learn and the deeper our understanding, the more our perspectives alter. Sometimes, our personal perspective can help us to empathise with others. At other times, it can prevent us from understanding their position, or even wanting to. It can be difficult, for example, if you have been the victim of a crime to have much empathy with or sympathy for the perpetrator of that crime, because you have a very different perspective on the event. However, as our experiences in life broaden, so too does our personal knowledge, and so consequently do our perspectives. We might learn to appreciate multiple shades of grey in things that once appeared to be only black or white, and understand and empathise more with the circumstances that have, for example, led a person to engage in crime.

One of the many reasons for promoting diversity in all aspects of society is that it provides everyone with the opportunity to meet, appreciate and learn from people with different ideas, experiences and perspectives.

REAL-LIFE SITUATION 1.4

Can you identify any significant experiences in your life that have caused your perspective on something to change?

Personal knowledge

Personal knowledge is the knowledge we personally have. Almost all of our personal knowledge is **experiential**. The exceptions would be any knowledge that is **innate**, that is, knowledge we are born with, or things that we can know **a priori**, that is, purely by reason. An example of innate knowledge might be knowing how to breathe, how to cry or knowing to search for our mother's nipple. Some people would say we are born with an innate sense of God.

KEY WORD

perspective: point of view, a particular way of seeing or considering something

KEY WORDS

experiential: based on experience

innate: something we are born with

a priori: purely by reason

1 Who is the knower?

DISCUSS 1.2

- 1 Is being able to breathe the same thing as *knowing* how to breathe?
- 2 Is there a difference between an instinct and innate knowledge? If so, what is it?

In his book *Meno*, Plato (c 427–348 BCE) wrote about a situation in which Socrates questioned an uneducated slave boy about a geometry **theorem**. Although the boy had never studied geometry, he was able to answer Socrates correctly. Plato argued that this was possible because the boy had an innate knowledge of mathematics. Many people have argued that Socrates led the boy to the correct answer through leading questions. (You will learn about leading questions in Chapter 12 on mathematics and Chapter 14 on the human sciences.) Although it is true that Socrates led the boy to the correct answer, the objection misses the point of Plato's argument, which is that the boy was able to grasp the **truth** for himself as he answered Socrates's questions. In principle, this means that the boy could potentially have discovered the theorem by himself if he had thought long and hard about it. If Plato was right, we all have an innate knowledge of mathematics that we could potentially tap into.

KEY WORDS

theorem: a principle or statement that can be demonstrated or proved using logic, but is not self-evident

truth: in accord with fact or reality, or faithfulness to a standard



Figure 1.2: Is a baby born with any knowledge?

Philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) completely disagreed with the idea of innate knowledge, although he did accept that we do have some biological instincts. In his essay entitled *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke argued that at birth our mind is a *tabula rasa*, meaning a blank slate. He believed that everything we know, biological instincts aside, is learnt from experience, whether directly or indirectly.

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Although most people today would tend to agree with John Locke, the linguist Noam Chomsky (1928–) has proposed a modern, modified version of innate knowledge that has enjoyed some popularity. Chomsky argues that humans have a unique, innate capacity for learning language, which involves us intuitively recognising a **universal grammar** that he claims all human languages share. In a similar vein, more recently it has been suggested that many animal species, including humans, appear to have an innate sense of number.

REAL-LIFE SITUATION 1.5

Do you believe that you were born with some knowledge, or do you believe that everything you know has been learnt?

Experiential knowledge can be *first-hand* or *second-hand*. First-hand knowledge is knowledge that we learn from our own personal experiences. It can include knowledge of people we have met and places we have visited, activities we have been involved in, experiments we have performed, and so on. Second-hand knowledge is knowledge that we learn *from* other people or sources. Some of this will be academic knowledge. For example, the knowledge of academic subjects that we might learn in school or through reading books, journals and articles, or through watching documentaries. Some of our second-hand knowledge will be informal knowledge; that is, knowledge we pick up through a wide variety of sources including friends, television, the internet and our local communities, without necessarily being aware that we are doing so.

For example, if you were to volunteer with a Search and Rescue (SAR) organisation, your first-hand knowledge would come from any training exercises you were involved in, as well as any real-life SAR operations you might participate in. As a result of your experiences with the SAR organisation, you might know how to communicate effectively using two-way radios, how to navigate using a map and compass and how to administer basic first aid. You could also have second-hand experiential knowledge from listening to or reading about the experiences of other people who are involved in SAR. This knowledge might include knowing how search teams are deployed, how searches are controlled and managed and how scent patterns vary according to different environmental factors. Informal knowledge you pick up could include information such as knowing the different types of rewards individual search dogs enjoy.

EXPLORE 1.2

If you were to write a 'personal encyclopaedia' summarising everything you know, how comprehensive do you think it would be? And how accurate?

Try to estimate how much of what you know is first-hand and how much is second-hand knowledge. Choose a field of knowledge that you are passionate about. It does not have to be an academic subject; it could be something like cricket, dogs or video games. Try to identify the main sources of this field of knowledge, and create a mind-map showing how they interconnect. How have the different sources contributed to shaping you as a knower?

KEY WORD

universal grammar:
 the idea that all human languages, no matter how different they appear, share some fundamental similarities



1 Who is the knower?

REFLECTION

Think about how your answers and mind-map might have been different if you had chosen a different field of knowledge. What does this tell you about how you learn what you know?

Sometimes you have to make decisions about what to regard as knowledge and what to reject. Such decisions are *deeply personal*. They can sometimes involve taking a position that goes against popular opinion or widely held **beliefs**.

KEY WORD

belief: confidence that something exists or is true

Personal ignorance

‘The more we know, the more we know we don’t know,’ is a quotation sometimes attributed to Aristotle. It expresses the idea that the more we learn about any field of knowledge, the more we discover there is so much more to learn about it, and the more we are able to appreciate that knowledge is rarely as certain, simple and straightforward as is often supposed.

Given the vast amount of knowledge in the world, we are inevitably ignorant of many things. **Ignorance** does not mean stupidity, and there is no shame in admitting ignorance. Even the most knowledgeable, clever and/or intelligent people will be ignorant about many things, because none of us can know everything. We all have wide gaps in our personal knowledge across all areas of knowledge. In fact, being aware of our ignorance gives us a huge advantage over those who are ignorant of their ignorance. Being aware of ignorance in any field of knowledge can spur us on to explore, research and learn more. It can also encourage us to call on **experts** for help, and be circumspect about our own conclusions.

KEY WORDS

ignorance: lack of knowledge

expert: a person with specialised knowledge in a particular subject



“That’s the guy I hired to read Proust for me.”

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EXPLORE 1.3

Look at the following problems. Which could you solve using your personal knowledge? Which could you solve if you did a little research? Which might you need to call an expert to help you with? What kind of expert might you call?

- a You need to know the name of the main protagonist in *Les Misérables*.
- b You need to do a school project on palm oil production.
- c Your knee is causing you pain.
- d You have broken the screen on your mobile phone.
- e You need to distil some water.
- f You are unable to sleep at night.
- g You want to improve your tennis skills.
- h You have been asked to create a costume for the school play.

One serious danger in relation to ignorance is when we believe that we know all there is to know, or that we know all that we need to know, in any field. For not only can we not know all there is to know, we also cannot even be fully aware of our own ignorance. This is why people who only know a little bit about a field of study often answer questions with far more confidence and **certainty** than those who have a much deeper understanding. This leads us to the **illusion of explanatory depth**.

If you were to ask a large number of people chosen randomly if they know how computers (or other familiar gadgets) work, many would say that they do. The same is true if you were to ask them if they understand about genetics, political systems or financial schemes such as mortgages, insurance, taxes, etc. If you then ask those same people to write a detailed **explanation** of how the object or system works, and then ask them to re-rate their knowledge, their personal rating of their self-knowledge tends to drop dramatically.

Multiple studies have been done testing people's self-knowledge on a vast array of objects or ideas, and the results always show a lower self-rating after participants are asked to explain what they know. You may have experienced the illusion of explanatory depth yourself if, for example, in the middle of an exam you belatedly realised that you did not understand something as well as you thought. This is one of the reasons why teachers often ask for essays and written answers.

As more and more information becomes readily available to us via the internet, as well as more traditional sources, we have a tendency to absorb a wide range of information but rarely in any depth. This can contribute to our illusion of explanatory depth.

REAL-LIFE SITUATION 1.6

You have probably done a great deal of reading about climate change and global warming, and the many contributing factors. How well do you think you understand the issue? Could you write a detailed explanation of it?

KEY WORDS

certainty: the quality of having no doubt

illusion of explanatory depth: the illusion that you understand something in detail when you do not

explanation: an account or statement that makes something clear