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Theory of knowledge

Only a shallow man doesn’t judge by appearances. (Oscar Wilde)

Aims

On completion of this chapter you should be able to:

■ evaluate rationalism
■ evaluate empiricism
■ distinguish between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge and account for the tensions between these categories
■ evaluate the foundationalist, coherentist and reliabilist theories of justification
■ outline and evaluate the tripartite definition of knowledge
■ explain the difference between ordinary and philosophical doubt
■ evaluate traditional and modern sceptical arguments
■ evaluate the naive realist theory of perception
■ evaluate the representational realist theory of perception
■ evaluate the idealist theory of perception
■ evaluate the phenomenalist theory of perception.

It is characteristic of philosophy to step back from familiar facts and figures and to talk in more general terms. Plato (c. 427–347 BC), one of the first philosophers, describes this approach in *The Republic* as ‘the study of essential natures’. The theory of knowledge lies at the very heart of the philosophical enterprise, which is in essence a quest for meaning. The essential questions surrounding knowledge concern its nature and whether we can categorise different types of knowledge, as well as the possibility of there being limits to what we can know. Epistemology, as the study of knowledge is called, inevitably connects with the philosophies of mind, science and language. Let us begin by examining the notion of knowledge itself.

**Knowledge**

The history of western epistemology (a word that derives from the Greek word *episteme*, which means ‘knowledge’) is the history of two schools of thought that seek to define knowledge in different ways. Rationalism sees knowledge as the product of reasoned reflection capable of operating independently of experience. Empiricism, on the other hand, views knowledge as the product of sensory experience. Rationalists believe that we arrive at knowledge by thinking about relations between concepts. We know, for example, that there are 60 seconds in a minute by learning the meanings of the terms ‘second’ and ‘minute’. In the same way, we know that there are 60 minutes in an hour, from which we can deduce that there are 3,600 seconds in an hour. This type of knowledge is called *a priori* knowledge. One does not even have to leave the comfort of one’s armchair to discover it, as the operation involves thought alone. In contrast, we acquire empirical or *a posteriori* knowledge from examination and observation. Thus we know from sensory experience that barium burns with an apple-green flame: all we need to do is perform the experiment and note the results.

The phrase *a priori* derives from the Latin meaning ‘from what comes before’ and the phrase *a posteriori* means ‘from what comes after’.
Rationalists, like Plato, believe that human beings are born with a body of knowledge already stored in the mind that enables us to recognise truths when we unearth them. Plato tells the story of Meno’s slave to illustrate the point that each of us has an innate capacity to reason. The narrator, Socrates, draws a number of geometric figures in the sand in front of Meno’s slave who, when asked a series of questions, recognises the right answers despite never having done any mathematics before. Empiricists, on the other hand, believe that all knowledge needs to be learnt and that there is no such thing as innate knowledge. The most famous empiricist, John Locke, described the human mind as a tabula rasa, a blank slate upon which facts acquired through experience are written.

Attempts have been made to bring together rationalism and empiricism. The most famous was made by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who saw the role of reason as one of organising phenomenal experience – that is, experience gained from the senses. The post-Kantian rationalist tradition has refined its standpoint from the days of Plato. It accepts that we acquire genuine knowledge from experience, but holds that we are born with the innate capacity to reason, which means that we know what to do with the information received from experience. A rationalist would agree with an empiricist that we cannot know that there are 3,600 seconds in an hour without having been told that there are 60 seconds in a minute and 60 minutes in an hour. But a rationalist would argue that in order to have reached the correct conclusion we require certain innate cerebral capacities such as an understanding of language and an ability to work out the relationship between the concepts that we acquire.

A priori knowledge is that body of information we know to be true from thinking about the concepts involved: from a logical examination we can conclude that there is something permanent, universal and necessary about this knowledge. Contrariwise, a posteriori knowledge is that body

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**John Locke**

(1632–1704)

Born in the Somerset village of Wrington in the summer of 1632, John Locke became one of the most prominent English empiricists of his age, as well as writing influential pieces on political philosophy. Locke’s contribution to empiricism consists in his idea that all our knowledge is accrued through the senses from birth. He explains sensory perception in terms of ‘primary and secondary qualities’ of objects. Primary qualities include size, shape and movement, and belong to objects irrespective of whether or not they are being perceived, while secondary qualities are imposed on objects by the observer and include colour, smell and taste.

Locke’s father wanted his son to study for the religious ministry, but the gaunt, scholarly student pursued various courses in medicine and philosophy in his intermittent time at Oxford, which lasted some thirty years. Locke was interested in politics, and during the English civil war supported the parliamentary party, who sought to reduce the power of the monarch and make him rule with parliament. Locke, as a supporter of the parliamentarians, fled to Holland but returned to England after William and Mary were brought to the throne during the Glorious Revolution. Locke’s famous political work, the *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690), was published after this turbulent time, although recent scholarship suggests an earlier authorship. Having returned to England, Locke suffered bad health and died in 1704.

**Significant works**

*Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690)

*Two Treatises of Civil Government* (1690)
of information acquired through sensory experience: from observation we can accurately report something about the world we live in. At the heart of the rationalist–empiricist debate is the question of whether knowledge is innate or gained from experience. But why do we need to decide between these two categories? Many philosophers of knowledge reject such a stark choice.

**Hume’s fork**

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) was the first thinker to propose an exhaustive account of knowledge that embraced both the *a priori* and *a posteriori* categories. He outlined his thoughts in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Section IV, Part 1) and his model is often referred to as Hume’s fork. This has two prongs that are designed to spear either one of two types of truth claim – termed ‘relations of ideas’ (*a priori*) and ‘matters of fact’ (*a posteriori*). Hume’s outline of knowledge consists in a clear-cut division between the self-evidently true (tautological) and the empirically verifiable (proved through experiment). Hume’s analysis may be represented as a diagram. Hume is a committed empiricist, yet admits to a category of knowledge gained from reason alone. This fact helps us to refine our definitions of rationalism and empiricism. A rationalist is any philosopher who believes that knowledge gained through reason is more immune from sceptical attack and therefore more fully ‘knowledge’, whereas an empiricist is any philosopher who argues that knowledge gained through the senses is informative and therefore more worthy of the title ‘knowledge’ than that gained from reason alone.

Humes’ fork divides the categories of statements with its two prongs, so that any statement must fall into all three categories on the same side: it must be either *a priori*, analytic and necessary, or it must be *a posteriori*, synthetic and contingent. The semantic categories ‘analytic’ and ‘synthetic’ refer to the kinds of statement. Hume holds that claims to knowledge are either true by definition (analytic) or can be tested by an experiment (synthetic). An example of an analytic statement is ‘All bachelors are unmarried’ whereas an example of a synthetic statement is ‘Potassium burns with a lilac flame’.

The category ‘modal’ describes logical possibilities and is described in terms of possible worlds. A possible world is the same kind of thing as the world we are experiencing at the moment but with room for conjecture and imaginary differences. I might imagine a possible world, for instance, in which I am made of...
Kant, however, suggested that there are certain sentences that can be established as true by the operation of thought alone (a priori) and in which the predicate is not contained in the subject (synthetic). He gives the following examples:

\[ 7 + 5 = 12 \]

Every event has a cause.

There is nothing inherently present in the concept of ‘7’ that makes it evident that when it is added to ‘5’ the result will be ‘12’. Likewise, there is nothing present in the concept of ‘an event’ that makes us immediately aware that it has been caused. Kant called such sentences synthetic, a priori statements, and this categorisation set the tone for a ferocious subsequent debate. Much of the argument centres on the clarity of the distinctions drawn and the issue of whether the above categories of a priori and a posteriori are mutually exclusive. Kant’s notion of the synthetic a priori is significant as it challenges the belief that there are two mutually exclusive accounts of knowledge termed ‘rationalist’ and ‘empiricist’ that can never be reconciled. Kant argues that sense-data are important building blocks of knowledge but points out that reason has an equally important role in organising this data. A similar position was developed by W. V. O. Quine, who is discussed later in the chapter.

A more recent protagonist who has stepped into the ring to challenge Hume’s fork is the American philosopher Saul Kripke (born 1940). He tries to prove the existence of a necessary, a posteriori category. Many of Kripke’s examples focus on the nature of proper names. Kripke holds that names behave in a very different way to straightforward descriptions such as ‘red’ or ‘female’.

- Proper names do not appear in dictionaries.
- Proper names possess only one bearer (signified by the intention of the speaker).
- Proper names are ‘rigid designators’ as distinct from general descriptions.
- Proper names once learnt have a necessary, a priori standing as one knows what is referred to without investigation.

**Bending Hume’s fork**

The most famous attempt to bend Hume’s fork is to be found in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (first edition, 1781). Kant draws a similar distinction between analytic and synthetic judgements to Hume’s. He draws our attention to the fact that basic sentences are made up of subjects (what the statement is about) and predicates (words used to describe the subject). Thus the sentence ‘Some roses are red’ features ‘Some roses’ as its subject and ‘are red’ as its predicate. Kant held that analytic statements are those in which the subject contains the predicate and which do not supply any additional information; an example would be the sentence ‘Red roses are red’. Synthetic statements do not have predicates which are contained in the subject and as a consequence give us new information; an example would be ‘This rose is red’ (it would still be a rose if it were another colour).

Such a statement as ‘All sisters are female’ is necessary, analytic and a priori. Indeed Hume assumes that all necessary, analytic truths are a priori. Similarly a statement such as ‘Sodium burns with a yellow flame’ is contingent, synthetic and a posteriori as we have gained this knowledge through observation and can entertain the idea of sodium burning with a different coloured flame. Other thinkers, however, have attempted to criticise this categorisation as being overly simplistic. Let us examine two such cases.

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The text continues with further discussion on the subject matter.
Despite it only being a contingent fact that my parents baptised me by a certain name (they might have chosen another one), I can nevertheless travel through any number of possible worlds and know that the inhabitants of each possible world are referring to me when they address me by means of my name. My proper name is a rigid designator and when used in context can only point to me. My proper name provides an example of a necessary, *a posteriori* truth. It is necessary because I retain my identity in all possible worlds, but it is *a posteriori* because you have to meet me first in order to find out who I am. Kripke supplies some scientific examples to act as exceptions to Hume’s fork. His favourites include:

- Water is H2O.
- Gold has atomic number 79.

Kripke argues that we need to perform an experiment in order to discover such information (so the truth is *a posteriori*), but water is the name of the substance H2O, and so the truth that water is H2O is necessary; similarly gold is the name of the substance with the atomic number 79. Like Kant’s argument, Kripke attempts to show that Hume’s position is not watertight.

### Review questions

1. Briefly explain the difference between the rationalist and empiricist accounts of knowledge.
2. Briefly explain the difference between *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge.

The twentieth-century logician and philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine was one thinker who questioned the profitability of a war between rationalism and empiricism. Indeed, the philosopher’s lexicon offers the verb ‘to quine’ as a denial of any absolute distinction. Quine sought a coherent philosophy of knowledge that incorporated logical truths and scientific discoveries. He attacked the false dichotomy between the analytic and the synthetic on the

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**W. V. O. Quine**  
(1908–2000)

Quine has emerged as one of the most significant intellects of the later twentieth century. He was born in Akron, Ohio, and majored in mathematics in Harvard where he gained a Ph.D. in only two years. Renowned as a logician and mathematical philosopher, he developed more original ideas in the years after his influential paper ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’ (1951) in which he challenged the synthetic–analytic distinction. Quine held that to suppose there is a boundary to be drawn between the synthetic and analytic is to adopt an unwarranted ‘article of faith’. His philosophy, which is firmly rooted in the Anglo-Saxon analytic school, was greatly influenced by Bertrand Russell. He sought to unify the scientific and philosophical enterprises, and believed that epistemology, rather than being some elevated discipline, was firmly rooted in mathematics and science. Quine served as a code-breaker for the navy in the Second World War before returning to a fellowship at Harvard. He wrote in a crisp, elegant style and lectured in a fast, machine-gun-like monotone. He enjoyed Dixieland jazz and travelling; indeed his interest in the latter is well attested in his autobiography *The Time of My Life* with details of routes and timetables. Quine’s other hobbies were stamp-collecting, map-reading and tracing the origins of words (especially words beginning with Q).

**Significant works**

- *From a Logical Point of View* (1953)
- *Word and Object* (1960)
- *Web of Beliefs* (1978)
- *Quiddities* (1987)
grounds that there is no such thing as pure *a priori* knowledge, and believed that everything is capable of being revised in the light of experience. Quine held that if one squeezes an analytic statement such as 'All bachelors are unmarried' hard enough, then it turns into a set of synthetic propositions: that some men are not married, and that these men are collectively given the English name 'bachelor'. At some moment in time someone had to point out an unmarried man and tell us that the English word 'bachelor' is used as a rigid, synthetic description. As he declares in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', 'the lexicographer is an empirical scientist'. Synthetic descriptions remain open to revision at some time in the future: another term might be used or a new discovery made. Like Kant, Quine finds a role for reason in organising sensory perceptions into what he terms 'a web of beliefs'. Each belief gains its meaning from the other beliefs to which it stands in relation and each individual thinker spins and repairs their own web of beliefs in order to catch the truth.

Quine's most famous attack on the analytic–synthetic distinction appears in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'. The two unfounded beliefs or dogmas are: an unwavering conviction in the existence of pure, analytic truths and the belief that all meaningful statements can be reduced to verifiable sense-data. Both dogmas are mistaken in assuming that one can easily separate language and experience.

**Justification**

Knowledge has traditionally been defined as 'justified true belief'. This idea is called the tripartite definition of knowledge (see pp. 13–14) and finds its origins in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Plato argues that knowledge cannot just consist in true belief alone and a further ingredient is required, namely justification. He gives the example of a jury who have a hunch that the accused is guilty and are in fact correct in this assumption but states that we would not be right in condemning the accused without some form of evidence.\(^5\)

Plato declares that the jury's true belief does not count as knowledge without proof, warrant or justification. It is this notion, that of justification, that concerns us in this section.

Knowledge is not based on guesswork or chance, but on having a good reason for holding a belief. Thus guessing a stranger's name correctly would not count as knowledge. This is what is meant when we say that a belief is 'justified'. There are three principal explanations as to what constitutes a good reason for holding a belief: foundationalism, coherentism and reliabilism. Let us examine each in turn.

**Foundationalism**

Foundationalists divide all beliefs into two main groups:

- **basic beliefs** – i.e. beliefs that support themselves and are, therefore, not inferred from other beliefs (non-inferential);
- **non-basic beliefs** – i.e. beliefs that need to be supported by other beliefs, which are inferred from other beliefs (inferential).

Foundationalism is often seen as a superstructure of non-basic beliefs that are built on a firm foundation of basic beliefs; such an image has led philosophers to call this theory of justification 'the pyramid model'. Foundationalism is favoured by empiricists, who are intent on building a structure of scientific knowledge. An empiricist model that uses scientific facts verified by sense-data as the candidate for basic beliefs may run as follows: Each level of beliefs builds on the previous stratum; one might say that each belief is inferred from what has already been established. In this example, the pinnacle belief acts as a test of the basic beliefs. Thus, if one is engaged in the

![Diagram](image_url)
activity of manufacturing some device, the main endorsement for the validity of your beliefs is if the end product works.

Foundationalism is not an exclusively empiricist model. Descartes (1596–1650) is one rationalist who constructs a pyramid from what he holds to be *a priori* beliefs: Descartes uses as his foundations the premises ‘God exists’ and ‘I think therefore I am’ (*cogito ergo sum*). He holds that such clear and distinct ideas are self-evidently true and from this firm basis we can demonstrate the existence of an external world of objects and even go as far as to discover laws governing how they work.

For non-basic beliefs to be justified they need to rest on basic beliefs. In many cases, these basic beliefs appeal to present sensory experiences. For instance, an empiricist might use as a basic belief an observation such as litmus paper changing colour or the atomic structure of a substance as seen through a microscope. Underlying this view is the conviction that sense-data are reliable, to the point of being privileged as basic beliefs. In turn, non-basic beliefs are justified on a scale of probability in relation to the concrete, infallible foundations of empirical data. For this reason, foundationalism has been termed an error-avoidance theory: foundationalists seek to avoid false beliefs and may make use of *scepticism* (see pp. 14–17) to rid the superstructure of any dubious beliefs that may lead to its collapse. Every level of the pyramid needs to be secured before it is built on. One might argue, however, that no basic belief is truly simple. So, for example, something as seemingly fundamental as a white sense-datum nevertheless implies a spectrum, an object to hold the property of whiteness or an area in which to be white. Basic beliefs are subject to two problems: either the basic belief is so basic that nothing of interest can be inferred from it or it yields too many possible but indeterminate beliefs.

**Criticisms of foundationalism**

There are two further strands of criticism of the foundationalist theory. The first we shall call the regress argument and it may be summarised as follows:

1. In the foundationalist model, each belief relies on another belief for its justification.
2. Basic beliefs cannot be treated as an exception and must in turn rely on a further set of beliefs for their justification.
3. There is no end to this process of justification, which must continue *ad infinitum*.

Philosophers term such a never-ending sequence an ‘infinite regress’, and consider it to be extremely problematic in any explanation.

The two pyramid models cited above create infinite regress: the Cartesian model begs warrant for a belief in God; the empiricist model assumes a correspondence between sense-data and reality. Foundationalists respond either by accepting that a regress occurs *ad infinitum* in any case of justification or by denying this fact. The second line of defence (denying infinite regress) sees hard-line foundationalists arguing that basic beliefs, by definition, do not need any further justification. Soft foundationalists view basic beliefs as lying beyond *reasonable doubt* and argue that accurate observation is the best we can hope for as the foundation to our knowledge.

The second major criticism of foundationalism rests on the fallibility of the sense-data (i.e. the possibility that sense-data are wrong). The English philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) argues in the following example that a more sophisticated way of determining truth and falsity is needed as opposed to an uncritical reliance on sense-data:
Domestic animals expect food when they see the person who usually feeds them. We know that all these rather crude expectations of uniformity are liable to be misleading. The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken.4

Russell’s sentiment, inherited from Humean scepticism, is that one cannot rely on any necessary connection between sense-data. This is a particular problem for empiricism. Underlying Russell’s concerns is the fact that just because something happens in a certain way does not mean that it always will (see section on the problem of induction, pp. 123–24). No belief can realistically be termed ‘infallible’, and as a consequence one cannot use basic beliefs as an indubitable foundation as even they might turn out to be unjustified. In response to this, some foundationalists argue more humbly that basic beliefs can at least provide us with a useful working model.

**Coherentism**
The coherentist theory of justification stresses the consistency, connectedness and cohesion of justified beliefs and is sometimes referred to as holism for this reason. A belief coheres with a general pattern of beliefs if:

- it is based on adequate evidence;
- it is not disproved by one’s current pattern of beliefs.

Thus I believe that an acid turns litmus paper red as I have observed the reaction take place and it fits in with my other convictions about chemistry. Coherentism may be compared to a raft on which each proposition is a length of driftwood bound together in order to float on a sea of uncertainty. Foundationalists, in contrast, set out to construct an oil-refinery-like superstructure. The coherentist aim is to sail on a self-contained body of knowledge in which:

- each proposition is to be judged on its own merits;
- each proposition is connected to at least one other proposition;
- no proposition can stand separately from the rest.

Beliefs in a foundationalist model have an asymmetrical structure, i.e. belief A is justified because it is based on basic belief B. Coherentism, contrariwise, operates a symmetrical relation between beliefs, i.e. belief A justifies belief B as much as belief B justifies belief A. For example, Eddington used planetary motion to prove Einstein’s predictions, yet Einsteinian physics can equally be employed to explain the position of Uranus. The two beliefs are mutually explanatory. Coherentists are reluctant to change the mutually reliant structure, as its main aim is to stay afloat. For this reason, the model has been called an ignorance-avoidance theory. It seeks to offer an explanation, accepting the likelihood of some falsehoods in order to obtain beliefs about the world around us and avoid drowning. As the set of justified beliefs expands, each belief in turn is better explained by the additions. An expansion of the set of justified beliefs must result in an improved, more comprehensive explanation than was previously offered. Cosmology is one example, where in ancient times poetic creation stories were told in order to fill an unsettling void. In due course, a more refined ‘big bang theory’ has replaced mythology as it dovetails with other scientific theories. It, nevertheless, remains a conjecture.

Three strands of coherentism may be identified: positive, negative and mixed. Positive coherence involves beliefs being justified if there is evidence for their truth. This approach is favoured in hard sciences such as physics and chemistry. Negative coherence involves beliefs being accepted until one unearths evidence against them. One might think of an archaeologist devising a likely explanation for a given feature that may be revised in the face of contrary evidence that comes to light. In practice, most theories are mixed.

**Criticisms of coherentism**
Let us examine two criticisms of coherentism. The first argument runs as follows:
1 Coherentists seek to offer a complete and comprehensive explanation made up of justified beliefs.

2 There might be more than one complete and comprehensive explanation made up of these justified beliefs, given that each belief has an equal and opposite possible belief. (For example, for my belief that Nelson’s Column is in London, there is an equal and opposite belief that Nelson’s Column is not in London.)

3 Coherentism does not provide adequate criteria with which to judge rival explanations.

4 Therefore, coherentism is an inadequate theory of justification.

This accusation is a powerful one: if every belief has an equal and opposite belief floating on the sea of uncertainty, how does one choose between them? One would have to argue in defence that the truth is somehow unique and that a truthful answer is the only answer where each belief coheres properly.

The argument from plurality may be refined in a second criticism. According to coherentism, any system of beliefs works if, and only if, it coheres. However, the entire system could be wrong or misinterpreted. Surely the justification of a belief needs to be linked to the truth of that belief. Yet no criteria are supplied by coherentists that enable us to test for truth. How do we judge rival explanations for the origins of the universe if each appears to cohere with what we already know about physics?

**Review questions**

1 Identify and explain two differences between foundationalism and coherentism.

2 Briefly explain the view that knowledge is justified true belief.

**Reliabilism**

The third theory of justification examined in this chapter is termed reliabilism. This account holds that a belief is justified if and only if it is the product of a reliable method. Reliabilists are not as much concerned with the ins and outs of how a method comes to be reliable as with the realisation that it is. Consider the following examples of reliable methods:

- **Testimony:** historians are able to work with primary sources to generate valuable information (such as ‘The battle of Hastings was fought in 1066’). They work with first-hand testimonies to elucidate facts and figures about past events.

- **Memory:** doctors use memory to remember the symptoms of various diseases in order to diagnose accurately.

- **Perception:** scientists use sensory perception in their day-to-day experiments. We learn that copper burns with a blue-green flame through observation.

- **Inference:** logicians use inference as a fail-safe method for deducing a valid conclusion. This may take the basic form, ‘Either p or q; not p: therefore q’ (see appendix 2 on critical thinking).

In practice, many reliable methods may be used together. Consider the example of a person who discovers a potentially valuable painting in her attic. She takes it along to an expert, who tells her that it is indeed a priceless work. On discovering another painting in this style she is even more delighted. This person relies on the art expert’s testimony. He is able to remember details and recognise them in works of art. In turn, given that one work is valuable and a second bears sufficient resemblance to the first, one may infer that the second piece is also valuable. One might express the conviction that the second work of art is of value in terms of probability. Indeed reliabilism is linked to probability:

1 It is reasonable, all things considered, to believe p (where p is some proposition).

2 p makes q (another proposition) highly probable.

3 So, all things considered, it is reasonable to believe q.

Reliabilism differs from foundationalism and coherentism in that it is concerned with the processes involved in generating justification rather than the relationship between beliefs. For this reason, it is termed an externalist theory of
justification. Reliability does not depend on human beings but on an external process that is noted by them. Foundationalism and coherentism are termed internalist theories of justification. To illustrate the difference, consider the scenario where an internalist and an externalist enjoy a day at the races. The internalist spends all day considering the form, the going, which trainers and jockeys are in luck, the age, weight and breeding of the runners. The externalist, however, spends an hour in the bar talking to his contacts, who he knows will give him a winner. The reliabilist or externalist does not understand how his contacts come up with so many successful tips at each meeting, but is eternally grateful that they do. Note that both punters might bring home equal winnings.

**Criticisms of reliabilism**

One frustration that is encountered in pursuing the reliabilist theory of justification is that no method of justification is infallible (i.e. reliable) in every instance. Your watch may have always provided reliable information about the time in the past but might stop tomorrow! In addition, one might imagine a historian being misled when looking at the Bayeux tapestry depiction of the battle of Hastings, thinking that Harold was shot in the eye with an arrow when, in fact, the character with an arrow in his eye might not have been Harold. Similarly, we might be forgetful or be impeded so we are unable to perceive accurately. Lastly, inference may supply a valid method, though not necessarily true conclusions. For example, one might argue flawlessly as follows without realising the ornithological error in the first sentence (not all swans are white!):

1. All swans are white.
2. Frank is a swan.
3. Therefore, Frank is white.

A second criticism of reliabilism stems from the circular nature of the reliabilist reasoning. The argument runs:

1. Reliable methods generate knowledge.
2. Knowledge is what is generated by reliable methods.

When laid out like this it becomes evident that the theory does not present clear criteria against which knowledge or reliability can be judged. Taken together these criticisms from error and circularity prove difficult for reliabilists to argue against. Yet, as we have seen, criticism can be waged against each of the three theories of justification: foundationalism, coherentism and reliabilism. Is it then ever possible to achieve certainty? One group of philosophers who believe that every form of justification and knowledge can be challenged are called ‘sceptics’. We shall meet some of their arguments later in this chapter.

**The tripartite definition of knowledge**

So far we have surveyed theories of knowledge and justification. We shall now look at the relationship between these concepts and explain the tripartite definition of knowledge. The term ‘tripartite’ means divided into three parts and refers to the traditional conception of knowledge as justified true belief. The definition may be expressed more formally in the following way:

For person X to know that $p$:

1. $p$ must be true.
2. Person X must believe that $p$ is true.
3. Person X must have some reason for believing (evidence or assurance) that $p$ is true.

I can be said to know that Mercury is the nearest planet to the Sun because it is, I accept that it is, and have assurance every time I scan the sky with my telescope.

The most famous objection to the tripartite definition of knowledge comes from E. L. Gettier’s short paper ‘Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?’ (1963). Gettier (born 1927) maintains that in certain circumstances all three elements are present, yet the resulting intellectual state cannot be counted as a genuine instance of knowledge. Such scenarios have been called ‘Gettier counter-examples’. Imagine yourself at a party; you gaze across the dance floor and notice that your friend Ben happens to be dancing. In fact, it is Ben’s identical twin brother Bill, but coincidentally Ben is also dancing close by:
It is true that Ben is dancing.
You believe Ben is dancing.
You have a good reason to believe that Ben is dancing.

Yet the above instance, according to Gettier, does not warrant the description of knowledge. Gettier’s examples dwell on the fact that the justification does not relate to the truth of the situation. Is there a clause that we can insert to rescue the tripartite definition from the scrap-heap of invalid arguments? Perhaps one might try the following to counter the effect of coincidence:

The justification for $p$ must correspond to the truth of $p$.

Thus, one might add to the previous example that you are justified in believing that Ben is on the dance floor if, and only if, the person you have observed is indeed Ben. In practice, it will be extremely difficult to prove this link for every supposition one makes.

Task
Invent your own Gettier counter-example. Explain how each of the three elements of truth, belief and justification are present and why your belief cannot, according to Gettier, be classed as knowledge.

Other wounds have been inflicted on the tripartite definition of knowledge. As we have previously seen, there is little agreement as to what constitutes justification. The tripartite definition does not specify which account of justification (foundationalism, coherentism or reliabilism) is to be accepted, nor does it specify what counts as truth.

There are rival epistemological theories as to the definition of truth (e.g. coherence, correspondence, performance and pragmatism). The tripartite definition of truth makes no attempt to resolve this wrangling.

Finally, one may accuse exponents of the tripartite definition of knowledge of overcooking the definition. In many cases we take knowledge to be self-evident and do not need to carry out laborious examinations. Self-evident knowledge, such as the mathematical truth $2 + 2 = 4$, appears to be beyond the need for justification.

**Scepticism**

**Doubt**

When we say a person is sceptical, we usually mean that that person is not easily convinced and doubts any claim that is not well founded. Scepticism is also the term used for a philosophical school of thought that has its origins in ancient Greece and which has had many famous advocates over the centuries. Sceptics believe that if they apply a systematic method of doubt to what is taken for granted some indisputable truths will be established. Philosophical doubt is used to discover the indubitable, i.e. that which cannot be doubted. Philosophical doubt differs from ordinary doubt in a number of ways:

- Philosophical doubt is concerned with the big questions in life.
- Philosophical doubt examines the justification of truths.
- Philosophical doubt does not need to have any practical benefits.
- Philosophical doubt challenges our idea of what counts as knowledge.

One of the earliest sceptics was the ancient Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis. He concluded that we could not know anything for certain and that this yielded a calm detachment from life known as *ataraxia*. Another ancient Greek philosopher, and follower of the Pyrrhonian school, was the stoic Agrippa. He challenged people, in what became known as ‘Agrippa’s trilemma’, to find a claim to knowledge that did not involve dogmatism, regress or circularity:

- **Dogmatism** is the entrenched commitment to a belief even in the face of contrary evidence. For example, members of some ancient tribes retain their beliefs about the nature of the world even when faced with contrary evidence.
- **Regress** is an endless sequence of justification where successive beliefs justify the next *ad infinitum* (we have already encountered this problem when looking at foundationalism).
- *Circularity* occurs when a set of beliefs justify each other. One might imagine a religious person arguing that they believe in God because God's existence is documented in scripture, which should be believed because it is the word of God.

Agrippa reached the conclusion that we can never assert a genuine claim to knowledge. Many centuries later, however, the French philosopher René Descartes believed that, through using sceptical arguments as a tool, he could engineer a whole epistemic structure founded on *certainty*. Unlike the previous Pyrrhonian scepticism, which has as its end uncertainty, Cartesian scepticism aims for truths that cannot be doubted. Note, however, that both Pyrrho and Descartes are global (radical) sceptics in that they cast doubt over all claims to knowledge rather than over claims in a localised area, such as morality, religion or science.

**Cartesian scepticism**

Descartes used a system of methodological doubt for a positive end in order to establish what is indubitable and to extinguish any trace of uncertainty. His conclusions sound surprising to the modern ear, which is used to hearing words such as 'scientific' and 'empirical' as bywords for assurance and authoritativeness. Instead, Descartes held that we cannot be certain of scientific truths and can only be sure about the existence of God, the existence of our souls and self-evident truths such as those found in mathematics. He used three main sceptical arguments to reach this conclusion. These arguments can be phrased in the form of questions:

- How do we know that our senses are delivering reliable information to our brains about what reality is like? (the argument from illusion)
- How do we know that what we experience is not a dream? (the argument from dreaming)
- How do we know that all that we believe is not deliberately created in our minds by an evil deceiver? (the argument from deception)

Descartes concluded that even if we were being deceived we could still be sure of our own existence, as it is impossible for someone to be deceived and not exist. He went on from this basic conclusion to derive certainty about the existence of God and the truths of mathematics.

Modern 'brain in a vat' arguments are direct descendants of Cartesian doubt, and take the form of asking the disquieting question 'How do you know that you are not a brain in a vat having your experiences controlled by some super-psychologist?' Hilary Putnam (born 1926) describes the scene thus:

The person's brain (your brain) has been removed from the body and placed in a vat of nutrients which keeps the brain alive. The nerve endings have been connected to a super-scientific computer which causes the person whose brain it is to have the illusion that everything is perfectly normal.

Every brain wave that we experience, whether it is a memory, personal experience or feeling, is the result of controlled electronic impulses and it is possible that every human being is fed these impulses artificially, as in the film *The Matrix*. Putnam operates in the same way as Descartes in using scepticism for an anti-sceptical purpose. Like Descartes, Putnam hopes to establish a positive conclusion. His brain in a vat argument differs from the Cartesian account of an evil deceiver in some notable ways. Putnam dispenses with a malign genius whose intent is to feed false beliefs into people's brains. Instead Putnam talks about all sentient beings suffering from a collective hallucination that is controlled by a self-refuting system. That we are all brains in a vat of nutrients would be admittedly a strange quirk of nature, but not inconceivable. Having sketched out the scene, Putnam goes on to argue that the expression 'I am a brain in a vat' is in fact a self-refuting proposition – that is, one which if true proves to be false. Putnam belongs to the analytic school of philosophy that defines meaningful statements as those which are either obviously true or provable by experiment. For Putnam, the sentence 'I am a brain in a vat' is factually meaningless as it suggests something that goes beyond the evidence for or against. The idea of being a brain in a vat has no external reference point that we can investigate and as such goes beyond belief and disbelief. If we are to
refer to some object or property in the physical world with any degree of meaning then we need to establish a causal link between our description and the thing itself. It is as if our description exists as a balloon that needs to be tied to physical evidence. Such a declaration as ‘We exist as brains in a vat’ is like an untied balloon or free-floating belief that exists beyond our reach and beyond the realm of reasonable doubt. Expressed more formally Putnam’s anti-sceptical arguments runs:

1 I know that I am here talking to you.
2 Sitting here talking to you entails that you are not a brain in a vat.
3 Therefore, I know that you are not a brain in a vat.

**Review question**

Identify two ways in which a sceptic can doubt that what we see is what there is.

**Humean scepticism**

Descartes was one of several philosophers to successfully use sceptical methods to establish a certainty (that thinking entails existence).

Scepticism has also been used in the empiricist tradition to clarify the nature of our knowledge. Two powerful arguments put forward by Hume illustrate the limits of the scientific enterprise. Hume states that just because we have observed the same effect follow an event on a myriad of previous occasions it does not mean that there is a necessary relationship between the cause and the effect. A sceptic is justified, therefore, in questioning such seemingly indubitable notions as that the sun will rise tomorrow by asserting that there is no logical justification for supposing that the sun will rise rather that the darkness will remain. 

The philosopher’s second argument warns of the dangers of classifying general laws as indisputable, owing to the fact that we can never complete an infinite number of observations. We might embark on a number of experiments to test the hypothesis ‘All frogs can swim’. Even if all the frogs in our experiment took to the water with consummate ease, it is still a leap of faith to move from the premise ‘All observed frogs can swim’ to the conclusion ‘All frogs can swim’. If we can theoretically conceive of an amphibian still wearing frog-sized armbands that hasn’t learnt to swim yet, then we cannot say that we have discovered a certainty about all frogs.

**Russellian scepticism**

Bertrand Russell was another empiricist philosopher who added to the mêlée of sceptical challenges. He focused on the distinction between appearance and reality (see chapter 14) and his argument can be laid out as follows:

1 Appearances differ from reality.
2 We are only acquainted with the appearances of things.
3 Therefore, we can never pronounce with certainty on the reality of things.

Russell’s argument is classed as sceptical as it sows the thought in our minds that reality might be different from the world as depicted by our sense-data. He concludes that we can only talk meaningfully about our sense-data and not about a separate reality, but he remains open to the possibility that there is such a separate reality.

In summation: the various strands of scepticism mentioned above all focus on the inadequacy of sense-data. Cartesian scepticism doubts that knowledge gained from sensory evidence could be as assured as knowledge gained from reason. Humean scepticism acknowledges information gained through the senses but doubts that this informs us of necessary truths. Russellian scepticism doubts that sense-data give us a true picture of what lies behind the world of everyday experience.

**Solipsism**

Descartes, Hume and Russell attempted to achieve a positive result from their sceptical challenges. For Descartes, it was the assurance of his own existence through the activity of thinking; for Hume, it was contingent truths gained from observation of the world around us; and for Russell, it was the fact that we can only meaningfully describe sense-data. The most extreme form of doubt is called solipsism, and yields a different conclusion. Solipsism is the
view that you alone are the only object of real knowledge and source of existence – that is, other objects only exist when and because you perceive them. The term is coined from two Latin words: *solus* meaning ‘alone’ and *ipse* meaning ‘self’.

The position divides reality into two conceptual frameworks or matrices. The first matrix consists in a familiarity with one’s own thoughts, experiences and emotions. The second comprises everything else, including other minds, the external world, time and space. While we can have certain knowledge of the first matrix, references to the second cannot be held as claims to knowledge.

Solipsism is in turn subject to the following criticisms:

- Language is too complicated to be invented by any one person and similarly could not be authentically maintained by only one user.
- Solipsism seems to offer a poor account of our existence in that even if it were true it does not supply an account of where our thoughts, experiences and emotions come from.
- Solipsism poses the wrong sort of questions. While in the past philosophers investigated things like consciousness and existence, today such topics belong in the remit of scientific investigation.

No mainstream philosophical movement has ever adopted a seriously solipsistic standpoint, perhaps due to the perceived lack of an audience, but it is nevertheless an interesting notion to explore! Solipsism raises uncertainties about the true nature of our perceptions. How do we know that what we see is what there is? The last section of this chapter supplies an outline of the four main accounts of perception.

**Perception**

We gain knowledge of the external world from sensory data: touch, sight, smell, hearing and taste. For this reason philosophers are interested in the mechanisms of sensory perception and pose the question, ‘What is going on when something is perceived?’ Four possible accounts are explored below: naive realism, representative realism, **idealism** and **phenomenalism**.

**Naive realism**

Any theory of perception that is described as ‘realist’ holds that we perceive the world as it really is and that there is no difference between appearance and reality. Naive realists believe that we have direct access to a naked, unmediated and unadorned reality. It is the commonsensical view that what we see is what there is; thus, observing a bowl of ripening fruit involves nothing more than opening my eyes and seeing what is really there. In addition, the term ‘naive’ has a technical meaning in the philosophy of perception, namely that objects contain the same properties when they are not being perceived as when they are being perceived. So, for instance, if I were to leave the kitchen for a moment or two, the oranges in the fruit bowl would continue being orange and the bananas would still be banana-shaped. In summary, the two principles of naive realism are as follows:

- the principle of direct realism, i.e. the belief that the relevant physical object and your immediate perception of it are indistinguishable in every way;
- the principle of innate properties, i.e. the belief that properties intrinsically belong to objects and that objects hold their properties even when they are not being perceived – this is to deny any distinction between primary and secondary qualities raised by representative realists (see below).

Naive realism runs into problems as there is clearly a complex process involved in perception that consists in an image of an object being presented to the mind’s eye. Science explains this in terms of light rays hitting the retina and producing brain waves. To argue that we have unmediated access to the external world is to ignore the role of the sense organs as instruments of perception. Secondly, naive realism seems to hold that whatever is immediately perceived must immediately exist. This is not true in cases of time lag, as when I see a star that ceased to exist years ago. Thirdly, arguments from illusion successfully counter the theory by showing how mistaken one can be when perceiving the world. The most effective arguments of this type involve cases of hallucination, where there is a radical discrepancy.
between our perceptions and relevant physical objects – there are no relevant physical objects present when a hallucination takes place.

Naive realism may be summarised in the following diagram:

Perceiver \(\longrightarrow\) World

**Representative realism**

Representative or indirect realism seeks to incorporate the scientific analysis of perception by talking about two worlds: the world around us and the world of images or representations that are presented to me. To use the example of sight: light reflects from objects in the external world (perhaps a bunch of grapes from our earlier example), my eyes are stimulated and a brain wave is produced. As a result I enjoy a visual experience of the grapes draped over the fruit bowl. Representative realists talk in terms of the actual grapes as they exist in the real world and the visual experience, representation or perception I have of the fruit.

The English empiricist John Locke advances a further notion concerning how we perceive the features of objects in the real world. Locke argues that some features (termed primary qualities) belong to the objects themselves and include shape, size and movement while other features (termed secondary qualities) are added by our sensory systems and include colour, texture and sound. Returning to our fruit example, a pear possesses the primary quality of being pear-shaped while also possessing the power to induce the secondary quality of a sweet taste as experienced by the perceiver. This secondary quality of sweetness is perceived by the person who eats the fruit but it is not said to belong to the pear itself.

Representative realists are left with an important question as to how the mental image corresponds to what exists in the real world. Some philosophers, called idealists, have even doubted that the real world exists, arguing that all that exists are our minds and their perceptions. For the moment let us summarise representative realism in the following diagram:

Perceiver \(\longrightarrow\) World I \(\longrightarrow\) World II

(in our mind) \(\longrightarrow\) (in reality)

**Idealism**

Idealism (and phenomenalism) may be described as anti-realist theories of perception in that they hold that there is no independent reality ‘out there’. The most prominent idealist was the Anglo-Irish bishop George Berkeley (1685–1753), who posed the question ‘How do we know that a material world exists?’ Berkeley’s conclusion was that there was no good reason for believing in the existence of material objects and that the notion of matter as an independently existing substance was groundless and unintelligible. For Berkeley, we can only be sure of three things: the existence of our own mind, the existence of ideas and the existence of God. It is God who keeps ideas in existence when they are not entertained in our minds. The idealist philosophy of existence and perception consists entirely of non-physical entities. Thus you may believe that the book you are currently reading exists in solid material form, but it is in fact a series of mental images perceived by your mind’s eye and stored in the library of God’s imagination when not ‘in use’, i.e. being perceived. Berkeley summed up this notion in his famous epigram *esse est percipi* – to be is to be perceived.

The idealist theory of perception has made many enemies down the years since its first formulation, but one must admire Berkeley’s originality. He is not questioning the existence of matter in order to be irritating but raises the question, ‘What good reason do we have for believing in a material realm?’ One of Berkeley’s contemporaries Samuel Johnson famously kicked a stone outside Berkeley’s church and declared, ‘I refute it thus’. His point was that it is obvious that the material world exists, yet his refutation is no refutation at all, as the stone, the act of kicking and Johnson’s exclamation would, according to idealism, all belong to the immaterial world of ideas. A more successful criticism may be made through countering Berkeley’s question ‘How do we know that matter exists?’ with a further question, ‘Is there a good reason for supposing that matter does not exist?’ This return fire suggests that idealism itself lacks justification and is, as a consequence, unlikely.