Introduction

I knew from the beginning that the title of this book would set me up as a straight man for witty colleagues: "*What Philosophers Know* – that'll be a short book, won't it?" Or, a bit more subtly, "Shouldn't that title be a question?"

It's not that philosophers lack disciplinary pride. They are quite impressed with how smart they are – in contrast, say, to historians, who, as a member of their clan once pointed out to me, are impressed by how much they know. Of course, the history of philosophy has at regular intervals thrown up imposing monuments of cognitive pretension. Almost every great philosopher claims to have put us on a path to sure knowledge. But the claim is always to have been the first to do this, so that each successive monument is built on the ruins of all the others. As a result, perceptive outsiders (and most insiders, for that matter) have made the disagreement of philosophers a byword.

The failure to reach agreement suggests a failure of argument. Philosophy, especially analytic philosophy, sees itself as distinctively committed to rigorous argumentation. We teach our students how to argue, claim to establish our views by argument, and criticize opponents for offering arguments that are invalid or based on dubious premises. The days are long gone when adequate philosophical argument had to be valid deduction from self-evident premises. We allow that a good philosophical argument may be inductive or based on premises expressing widely shared common-sense judgments. There has, in particular, been a strong recent trend to support a philosophical theory as the best explanation of various data, corresponding to the "obvious facts" about, say, knowledge, reference, or morality. But even with the most generous plausible sense of proof, philosophical arguments are not adequate to settle the great disputes about, say, the existence of God, the nature of the mind, the reality of freedom, or the basic principles of morality.

Of course, some philosophers (sometimes even enough to constitute a school or movement) find some arguments convincing and, if they are

right, they may well in some sense know the truth about the disputed issues. But, throughout the philosophical community as a whole, it seems that there is almost always fundamental disagreement about even the strongest arguments, so that we can never say that *philosophy as a discipline* knows the answer to any central philosophical question. In contrast to disciplines in the formal, physical, biological, and even (sometimes) social sciences, there seems to be no body of philosophical truth that our discipline can authoritatively assert to the wider intellectual world. The physicists can rightly tell their students, "This is what we know," whereas philosophers can only say "Some of us think this, others that." It seems that, as critics of philosophy (and many philosophers themselves) have said through the ages, there is no established body of philosophical knowledge because there is no end to philosophical disagreement.

I maintain, nevertheless, that there is a body of disciplinary philosophical knowledge achieved by (at least) analytic philosophers of the last fifty years. I agree that this knowledge does not encompass answers to the standard "big questions" about God, freedom, mind, and morality. But I do claim that it is a substantive body of knowledge and one of great cultural significance. Those without access to this knowledge will be severely limited in the essential reflective dimension of human existence.

My discussion belongs to the disdained and marginalized domain of *metaphilosophy*, and I hasten to assure the reader that "I, too, dislike it."[1] But I've tried to avoid the two features that have typically made metaphilosophy so unsatisfying: a dogmatic attitude that derives the nature of philosophy from controversial philosophical doctrines (e.g., idealist metaphysics or empiricist epistemology) and an abstract, overly generalized approach that pays no attention to the details of philosophical practice. As the reader will see, I am much more positively disposed to Richard Rorty's effort to characterize philosophy in its historical and cultural context, but in the end I conclude that he paints with too broad a brush and with a palette limited by his assumptions of what successful philosophy would have to do.

My approach, by contrast, derives from that of historians and philosophers of science, who focus on case studies of exemplary instances of the disciplines they are trying to understand, thereby avoiding the perils of both a priorism and abstraction. Just as philosophers reflecting on science start from close studies of exactly what Galileo, Newton, and

[1] Marianne Moore, "Poetry," *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore*, New York: Macmillan, 1967, 36.

Darwin achieved and how they did it, so I propose to develop an understanding of what Quine, Kripke, Rawls, *et al.* have achieved in philosophy.

I take my exemplars from recent analytic philosophy first because, despite a good deal of work on the continental side of the street, I think of myself as an analytic philosopher. More important, analytic philosophy works from a self-understanding that seems to commit it to claims of knowledge. Unlike those in other humanistic disciplines – and even some who claim the name of philosopher – we disdain what Wallace Stevens called "the tired romanticism of imprecision."[2] We undertake to state exactly what we mean and prove with step-by-step lucidity that it is true. If philosophical knowledge exists anywhere, we should expect it to exist in the analytic realm.

I've further restricted myself to more recent analytic philosophy (the last fifty years), both for the sake of a coherent focus and to minimize the hermeneutic difficulties of dealing with work removed from our own milieu. Beyond that, I've tried to choose cases that cover an important range of topics without exceeding by too much my own limited set of competences. I realize that I've omitted many obviously excellent examples and included some that others may find inappropriate. Nonetheless, I'm content that my case studies at least provide a helpful starting point for my topic.

In searching for philosophical knowledge, I begin with three achievements for which some of the strongest cognitive claims have been made by many philosophers: W. V. O. Quine's "refutation" of the analytic-synthetic distinction, Saul Kripke's rehabilitation of necessity in metaphysics and the philosophy of language, and Edmund Gettier's counterexamples against the standard definition of knowledge. How often have we heard (or told others) that Quine refuted the analytic-synthetic distinction, that Kripke proved that there are necessary a priori truths, and that Gettier showed that knowledge cannot be defined as justified true belief? But, although I entirely agree that Quine, Kripke, and Gettier have achieved something of philosophical importance, a careful reading of their exemplary texts does not reveal any decisive arguments for the conclusions they are said to have established. Chapters 1–3 make this point through a detailed analysis of these texts.

Nonetheless, I maintain that these exemplary pieces of philosophy have generated important philosophical knowledge. In chapter 4 I argue first

[2] Wallace Stevens, "Adult Epigram," *Collected Poetry and Prose*, The Library of America, 1997, 308.

that they contribute to a body of "second-order" knowledge about the prospects of general philosophical pictures. The notion of a *picture*, which I take from Kripke, applies to broad views such as empiricism, materialism, and theism, which have been understood and defended in various ways over the philosophical centuries.[3] Philosophers of great imaginative power, such as Quine and Kripke, can, without establishing its truth, make a strong case for a picture's potential for fruitful development. Even though they provide no sound argument for finally accepting the picture as correct, they develop very good reasons for taking it seriously and working to develop it. This is what Quine did for his holistic picture of knowledge in "Two Dogmas" and what Kripke did for his metaphysical picture of necessity in *Naming and Necessity*. Reflection on our first three case studies will give some detail regarding the process – which I call *persuasive elaboration* – that supports a picture's viability and fruitfulness. Whereas Quine and Kripke support their pictures without formulating them theoretically, other cases (e.g., that of Goldman's reliabilism) support a picture by demonstrating its ability to generate a series of increasingly more detailed and adequate theories.

But chapter 4 also argues that there is a substantial body of first-order philosophical knowledge – knowledge not about philosophical pictures but about the subject-matter (language, necessity, knowledge, etc.) treated by those pictures. Such knowledge is typically about the nature of fundamental *distinctions* and the limits of their application. It is often ignored because it is not ordinarily the goal of philosophical reflection but a by-product of (generally unsuccessful) efforts to answer standard "big questions." So, for example, even those who do not accept Kripke's overall account of reference and necessity can appreciate and appropriate his use of rigid designation to distinguish naming from description. Knowledge of important distinctions is often not the result of any one individual's work but rather accumulates over time, one philosopher following another in refining and deepening our understanding of a distinction, and the philosophical community as a whole implicitly incorporates the results into its future thinking. Our case studies will reveal many instances of this process.

[3] Corresponding to a given picture are, again following Kripke, a variety of *theories* that provide detailed formulations of the picture. Theories range from a given philosopher's highly similar, successive efforts to express a picture – e.g., Plato's dualism in *Phaedo* and *Republic* – to vastly different formulations from different philosophers at widely separated times – e.g., Plato's, Descartes', and David Chalmers' formulations of dualism. We will later discuss the role of theories in developing and defending pictures.

We will also see some striking cases in which what presents itself as a challenge to a distinction turns out to be a positive contribution to our understanding it. I will argue, for example, that Quine should be ultimately seen as contributing to our understanding of the analytic-synthetic distinction, not refuting it. Similarly, the upshot of many years of Gettier epistemology has been to establish the fundamental soundness of the characterization of knowledge (in distinction from mere true opinion) as justified true belief – a result refined, however, by an understanding of the limits of the (extensive) domain in which the characterization is valid.

The claim that there is a substantive body of philosophical knowledge will lead many critics to ask for an account of the nature and justification of such knowledge. I argue, however, that although this question is interesting in itself as a further philosophical or psychological topic, answering it is not a necessary condition for showing that philosophy has produced authoritative knowledge. Our case studies show that the knowledge exists, quite apart from any account of how this is possible. The last part of chapter 4 develops this point in the context of recent debates about intuition in philosophy. I distinguish three main sorts of intuitions, discuss their role in philosophical knowledge, and reflect on recent critiques of intuitions by naturalist and "experimentalist" philosophers. I conclude that, whether or not there is a special faculty of philosophical (e.g., modal) intuition, establishing the nature and reliability of any such faculty is not required to show that there is a body of authoritative philosophical knowledge.

Our next four case studies (chapters 5–8) continue the case for philosophical knowledge but also focus on the central role played by pre-philosophical *convictions* in the development of this knowledge. What I will call the "foundationalist" conception of philosophy, which demands argument from uncontroversial premises, rejects the introduction of such convictions as intellectually irresponsible. But one of the most important results of recent philosophy has been the inadequacy of this foundationalist conception, a result that opens the door to a positive role for pre-philosophical convictions. Chapter 5 introduces this role by discussing Alvin Plantinga's transformation of the philosophy of religion from the criticism to the defense and development of religious convictions. It might seem that only religiously committed philosophers will deploy pre-philosophical convictions. But chapter 6 shows, through discussions of David Chalmers' zombie argument and Peter van Inwagen's consequence argument, how materialist or naturalist convictions play an essential role

in debates about consciousness and freedom. Similarly, chapter 7 argues that one major effect of Thomas Kuhn's historicist challenge to the positivist account of science was to reveal that philosophers of science accepted the rationality of science as a pre-philosophical conviction. Kuhn's work also highlighted the irreducible role of judgment in the knowledge of scientific disciplines, a result that also applies to philosophy.

Chapter 8 presents John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* as a detailed example of the philosophical development and defense of pre-philosophical convictions, in this case liberal democratic convictions about a just society. Rawls' case for his two principles of justice is a useful model of how non-foundationalist argumentation can lead to philosophical knowledge. His work is also a good example of how convictions arise not from disengaged intellectual intuitions but from practices that are central to our identities.

Convictions typically express major philosophical pictures and so can be judged viable or not depending on the success of the persuasive elaboration of these pictures. Also, established philosophical distinctions are essential means for clarifying and evaluating convictional claims. Accordingly, although convictions are initially held independent of philosophical arguments, their intellectual viability requires that they pass the test of philosophical scrutiny. Because convictions provide answers to the traditional big questions, their essential tie to philosophy maintains the discipline's connection to its founding questions, even though they have no decisive philosophical answers.

Our final case study, in chapter 9, looks at the work of Richard Rorty as an example of philosophizing that itself concerns the metaphilosophical topics we have been exploring. Here I both examine Rorty's modes of argumentation (which turn out to fit the modes at work in our other case studies) and respond to Rorty's rejection of philosophy as a body of disciplinary knowledge. I argue that, ironically, Rorty's rejection follows only if we assume that philosophical knowledge has to meet the foundationalist ideal of proof from indisputable premises. I also examine Rorty's debate with McDowell on truth to reject the suggestion that my claims to philosophical knowledge depend on an incoherent notion of objectivity.

My concluding chapter 10 summarizes the case for philosophical knowledge and illustrates the importance of such knowledge outside the discipline of philosophy by showing the relevance of philosophical results to the evaluation of religious convictions.

Like many, I became a philosopher because I wanted to know the truth about the great questions of human life; and, like even more, I

learned soon enough that there was little likelihood of finding decisive philosophical answers to these questions. This utterly common experience led me to expect that this book would be an essentially skeptical exercise. I have been delighted to find that I was wrong. Skepticism about philosophy derives from the assumption of philosophical foundationalism, itself refuted by philosophical reflection. Once we give up this assumption, we are able to see philosophy for what it is: a major source of humanistic knowledge, fully entitled to the respect and deference accorded other successful cognitive enterprises.

PART I

How does that go? The limits of philosophical argument

CHAPTER 1

Quine's "Two Dogmas": argument or imagination?

TWO SORTS OF KNOWLEDGE?

A lot of our knowledge derives from sense experience: from what we see, hear, touch, etc. Other things we know – about mathematics and logic, for example – seem quite independent of sense experience; we know them simply by thinking – about, for example, the definition of a triangle or the meaning of the term "implies." Philosophers have long recognized this fact by a distinction between knowledge that is *a posteriori* (derived from sense experience) and knowledge that is *a priori* (derived from mere thinking, independent of sense experience). This distinction concerns the ways in which we know. Two further distinctions suggest themselves, one concerning what our knowledge is about (its content) and the other concerning its stability (or, to use the standard logical term, its modality). First, there is a distinction between knowledge about the world we encounter through our experience and knowledge derived from the meanings of the concepts (or words) we use to think. Philosophers, at least since Kant, have called knowledge about the world *synthetic*, and knowledge about meanings *analytic*. Second, there is a distinction between knowledge that is *contingent* (about what can change, such as the color of a leaf) and knowledge that is *necessary* (about what cannot change, such as the fact that blue is a color).

Philosophers have focused intensely on these distinctions, not only because they seem important for understanding knowledge in general but also because they seem crucial for understanding the nature of philosophical knowledge itself. It has been generally agreed that a posteriori knowledge is the domain of the empirical sciences (including the everyday perceptions from which they originate); so if philosophy is to be an autonomous discipline, it must have access to a distinctive domain of a priori truths. Beginning with Plato, many philosophers (those often called rationalists) have maintained that such knowledge derives from

intellectual, as opposed to sensory, intuitions of necessary truths about fundamental realities. Other philosophers, often called empiricists, reject intellectual intuitions, maintaining that only sense experience (hence science) yields knowledge of reality. Accordingly, philosophical knowledge, if there is any, must be both a priori and analytic. Kant, rejecting both intellectual intuition and empiricism, made a profound effort to show that philosophical (like, he thought, mathematical) knowledge is a priori *and* synthetic. Philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century was split among those who reasserted the rights of intellectual intuition (idealists), those who continued Kant's philosophy of the synthetic a priori (neo-Kantians), and those who revived empiricism (logical positivists). In the English-speaking world, from the 1920s through the 1950s, empiricism in the form of logical positivism defined much of the philosophical agenda. As a result, the analytic-synthetic distinction was at the heart of epistemological discussions and underlay the conception of philosophy as an autonomous body of knowledge. The leading logical positivist, Rudolf Carnap, was particularly prominent in explicating and defending the distinction.

Willard van Orman Quine, who had worked with Carnap in Vienna during a post-doctoral year (1932), early on developed qualms about the distinction, which he began to articulate in discussions with Carnap. These discussions continued intermittently, both in person and by letter, through the 1930s and into the 1940s. Quine comments that he had not thought of his "strictures over analyticity as the stuff of revolution. It was mere criticism, a negative point with no suggestion of a bright replacement."[1] But eventually Quine came to see his criticisms in a broader and deeper context. He says that "in June and July of 1947 a triangular correspondence on the issue developed among [Nelson] Goodman, Morton White, and me."[2] Others in the philosophical community got wind of an important development, and Quine was invited to present a paper on the topic at the 1950 meeting, in Toronto, of the APA Eastern Division.

In December 1950, Quine read "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" to the APA, and a printed version appeared in *The Philosophical Review* the following year. In the words of Richard Rorty, the paper "rocked the audience back on its heels" and, after its publication, "went on to become the most discussed and influential article in the history of 20th-century

[1] W. V. Quine, "Two Dogmas in Retrospect," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21 (1991), 265–74; citation 267.
[2] Ibid., 268.