Part 1

KNOWERS AND KNOWING

The problem of knowledge

1

The greatest obstacle to progress is not the absence of knowledge but the illusion of knowledge.

Daniel Boorstin, 1914–2004

The familiar is not understood simply because it is familiar.

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 1770–1831

By doubting we are led to enquire, and by enquiry we perceive the truth.

Peter Abélard, 1079–1142

All men have opinions, but few think.

George Berkeley, 1685–1753

Properly speaking, there is no certainty; there are only people who are certain.

Charles Renouvier, 1815–1903

A very popular error – having the courage of one's convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack upon one's convictions.

Friedrich Nietzsche, 1844–1900

Common sense consists of those layers of prejudice laid down before the age of 18.

Albert Einstein, 1879–1955

It is the customary fate of new truths to begin as heresies and to end as superstitions.

T. H. Huxley, 1825–95

There are two ways to slide easily through life: to believe everything, or to doubt everything; both ways save us from thinking.

Alfred Korzybski, 1879–1950

We know too much to be sceptics and too little to be dogmatists.

Blaise Pascal, 1623–62

Introduction

We live in a strange and perplexing world. Despite the explosive growth of knowledge in recent decades, we are confronted by a bewildering array of contradictory beliefs. We are told that astronomers have made great progress in understanding the universe in which we live, yet many people still believe in astrology. Scientists claim that the dinosaurs died out 65 million years ago, yet some insist that dinosaurs and human beings lived simultaneously. Apollo 11 landed on the moon in 1969, but it is rumoured in some quarters that the landings were faked by NASA. A work of art is hailed as a masterpiece by some critics and dismissed as junk by others. Some people support capital punishment, while others dismiss it as a vestige of barbarism. Millions of people believe in God, yet atheists insist that 'God is dead'. Faced with such a confusion of different opinions, how are we to make sense of things and develop a coherent picture of reality?

Given your school education, you might think of knowledge as a relatively unproblematic commodity consisting of various facts found in textbooks that have been proved to be true. But things are not as simple as that. After all, if you had attended school one hundred or five hundred years ago, you would have learned a different set of 'truths'. This suggests that knowledge is not static, but has a history and changes over time. Yesterday's revolution in thought becomes today's **common sense**, and today's common sense may go on to become tomorrow's superstition. So what guarantee is there that our current understanding of things is correct? Despite the intellectual progress of the last five hundred years, future generations may look back on our much-vaunted achievements and dismiss our science as crude, our arts as naive, and our ethics as barbaric.

KT – common sense: cultural beliefs and practices generally considered to be true without need for any further justification

When we consider ourselves from the perspective of the vast reaches of time and space, further doubts arise. According to cosmologists, the universe has been in existence for about 13.7 billion (13,700,000,000) years. If we imagine that huge amount of time compressed into one year running from January to December, then the earliest human beings do not appear on the scene until around 10.30 p.m. on 31 December, fire was only domesticated at 11.46 p.m., and the whole recorded history occupies only the last ten seconds of the cosmic year. Since we have been trying to make sense of the world in a systematic way for only a minute fraction of time, there is no guarantee that we have got it right. Furthermore, it turns out that in cosmic terms we are also fairly small. According to astronomers, there are ten times more stars in the night sky than grains of sand in *all* the world's deserts and beaches. Yet we flatter ourselves that we have discovered the laws that apply to *all* times and *all* places. Since we are familiar with only a minute fraction of the universe, this seems like a huge leap of faith. Perhaps it will turn out that some of the deeper truths about life, the universe and everything are simply beyond human comprehension.

Common sense

Most people do not think that there is a problem of knowledge and they see knowledge as nothing more than organised common sense. While there may be something to be said for this view, the trouble is that much of what passes for common sense consists of little more than vague and untested beliefs that are based on such things as prejudice, hearsay and blind appeals to authority. Moreover, many things that at first seem obvious to common sense become less and less obvious the closer you look at them.

Yet we need some kind of picture of what the world is like if we are to cope with it effectively, and common sense at least provides us with a starting point. We all have what might be called a **mental map** of reality, which includes our ideas of what is true and what is false, what is reasonable and what is unreasonable, what is right and what is wrong, etc. Although only a fool would tell you to rip up your mental map and abandon your everyday understanding of things, you should – at least occasionally – be willing to subject it to critical scrutiny.

KT – mental map: a personal mental picture of what is true and false, reasonable and unreasonable, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly

To illustrate the limitations of our common-sense understanding of things, let us make an analogy between our mental maps and real geographical maps. Consider the map of the world shown below, which is based on what is known as the Mercator Projection. If you were familiar with this map as you grew up, you may unthinkingly accept it as true and be unaware of its limitations.

Figure 1.1 The Mercator Projection

ACTIVITY 1.1

1. Think of as many different ways as you can in which the world map shown in Figure 1.1 is:
   a. inaccurate
   b. based on arbitrary conventions
   c. culturally biased.
2. Do you think it would be possible to make a perfect map of a city? What would such a map have to look like? How useful would it be?

Among the weaknesses of the map in Figure 1.1 are the following:

1. It distorts the relative size of the land masses, so that areas further from the equator seem larger than they are in reality. The distortion is most apparent when we compare Greenland to Africa. According to the map they are about the same size, but in reality Africa is fourteen times bigger than Greenland.
2. It is based on the convention that the northern hemisphere is at the top of the map and the southern hemisphere at the bottom. Although we are used to this way of representing things, the reality is, of course, that the world does not come with a label saying 'This way up'!
3. The map is Eurocentric in that it not only exaggerates the relative size of Europe, but also puts it in the middle of the map.

Now compare the Mercator Projection with another map of the world, known as the Hobo-Dyer Equal Area Projection (Figure 1.2).

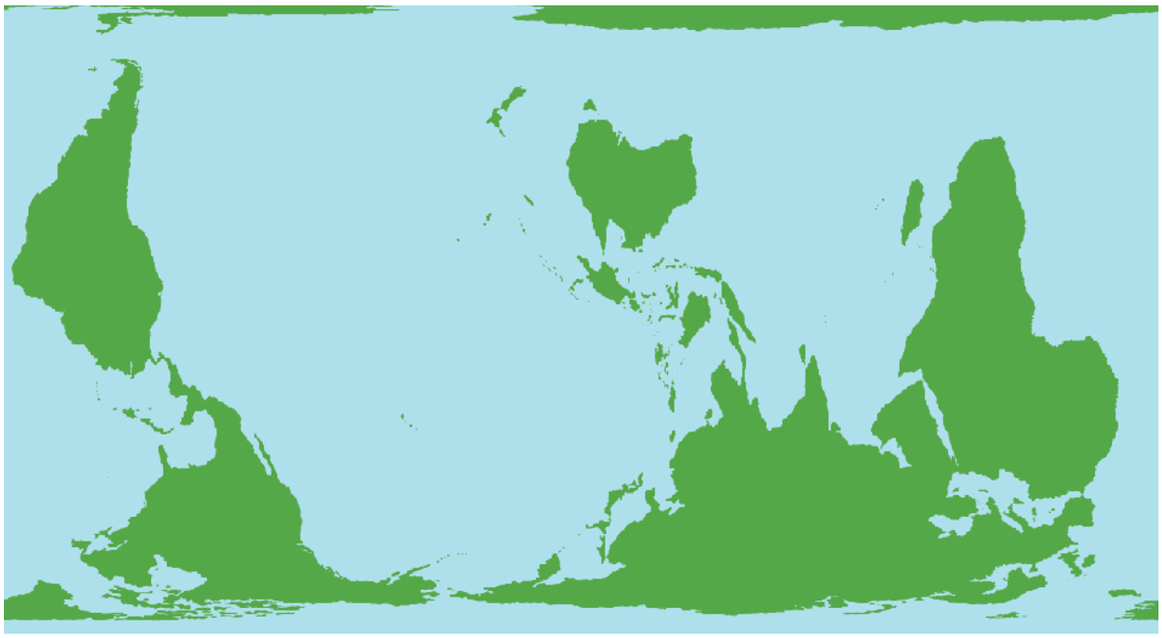

Figure 1.2 The Hobo-Dyer Equal Area Projection

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Figure 1.3 *The Treason of Images*

This projection accurately reflects the relative sizes of the land masses (although it distorts their shape); it has the southern hemisphere at the top and the northern hemisphere at the bottom; and it is centred on the Pacific rather than Europe. The fact that most people find this map disorienting illustrates the grip that habitual ways of thinking have on our minds and how difficult it is to break out of them.

The point of this excursion into maps is to suggest that, like the Mercator Projection, our common-sense mental maps may give us a distorted picture of reality. Our ideas and beliefs come from a variety of sources, such as our own experience, parents, friends, teachers, books, the news media – and, of course, the internet. Since we don't have time to check up on everything to make sure that it is true, there are likely to be all kinds of inaccuracies, half-truths and falsehoods woven into our mental maps. Furthermore, it can be difficult for us to think outside the customs and conventions with which we are familiar and see that there may be other ways of looking at things. Finally, there may be all kinds of cultural biases built into our picture of the world. If you ask an English person to name the greatest writer and greatest scientist of all time, they will probably say Shakespeare and Newton. If you ask the same question to an Italian, they are more likely to say Dante and Galileo. Meanwhile in China they will boast about their four great inventions – the compass, gunpowder, paper-making and printing – and urge you to read *The Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin (1715–1763).

One final point to draw out of this discussion is that, while different maps may be more or less useful for different purposes, there is no such thing as a perfect map. A *perfect* map of a city which included every detail down to the last brick and blade of grass would have to be drawn on a scale of 1:1. Such a map would, of course, be useless as a map, and would in any case quickly become out of date. We might call this the *paradox of cartography*: *if a map is to be useful, then it will necessarily be imperfect*. There will, then, always be a difference between a map and the underlying territory it describes. To sum up in a well-known slogan that is worth keeping in mind throughout this book: '*the map is not the territory*'.

ACTIVITY 1.2

1. What relevance do you think the slogan 'the map is not the territory' has to our search for knowledge?
2. Look at the painting *The Treason of Images* (1928–9) by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte (1898–1967). What do you think of the title of the painting? What has this got to do with our discussion?

Certainty

If there are problems with our common-sense picture of the world, perhaps we should abandon our everyday understanding of things and limit ourselves to what is certain. For it has often been thought that certainty is what distinguishes knowledge from mere belief. The idea here is that when you know something you are certain it is true and have no doubts about it; but when you merely believe it, you may think it is true, but you are not certain. At first sight, this seems reasonable enough; but when you start to look critically at the things we normally claim to know, you may begin to wonder if any of them are completely certain!

ACTIVITY 1.3

List in order the five things in life that you are most certain of. Compare your list with someone else's. Can you come to any agreement?

RLS – Headline: 'Mysterious UFO over Denver Puzzles Aviation Experts'. Is it reasonable to believe in UFOs?

Consider, for example, the following four statements:

1. I know that Neil Armstrong landed on the moon in 1969.
2. I know that strawberries are red.
3. I know that if *a* is bigger than *b* and *b* is bigger than *c*, then *a* is bigger than *c*.
4. I know that murder is wrong.

KT – ways of knowing: the eight possible ways of acquiring knowledge outlined by the Theory of Knowledge – language, reason, perception, intuition, emotion, memory, imagination, faith

I imagine you would say that all of the above statements are true. But how do you know? You might say that you know that Neil Armstrong landed on the moon in 1969 because you read about it in an encyclopaedia or online; you know that strawberries are red because you can see that they are red; you know that if *a* is bigger than *b* and *b* is bigger than *c*, then *a* is bigger than *c* because you can reason it out; and you know that murder is wrong because it is intuitively obvious. However, if you ask yourself whether you are 100 per cent certain that these statements are true, doubts may begin to creep in. A quick look at four key **ways of knowing** – language, sense perception, reason and intuition – suggests that they cannot simply be taken at face value.

1 Language

Language enables us to acquire knowledge from other people, and we claim to know a great many things because we have been told them or we have read them somewhere. However, the authority of other people is not always a reliable source of knowledge, and even the so-called experts sometimes 'get it wrong'. If you are into conspiracy theories, you might ask how we can be sure that the alleged American moon landings were not an elaborate CIA-inspired hoax.

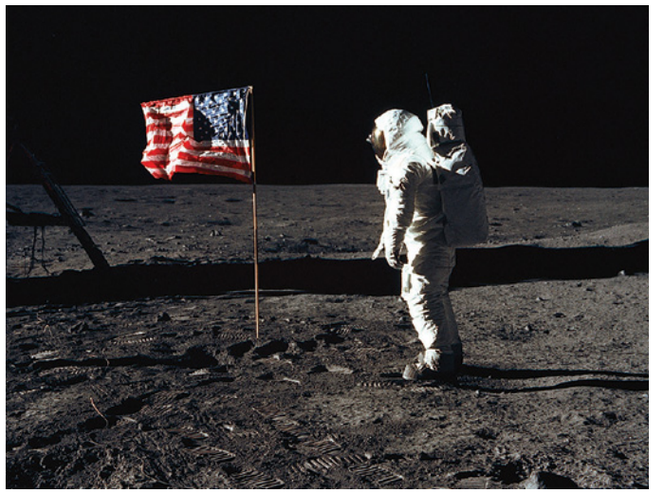

Figure 1.4 How sure are you that the Americans landed on the moon?

2 Sense perception

Much of our knowledge is based on personal experience, but our senses sometimes deceive us. For example, if you are colour blind, you might not see strawberries as red. We shall have more to say about this in Chapter 5. For the time being, you might like to consider Figure 1.5.

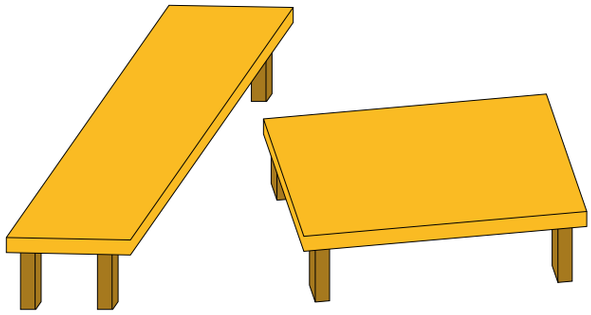

Figure 1.5

Believe it or not, the two table tops are exactly the same shape and size. This suggests that we should not blindly trust our perception and assume that it gives us certainty.

3 Reason

Statement 3 above might seem less open to doubt than the others, and some philosophers have claimed that reason gives us greater certainty than perception. In practice, however, people do not seem to be very good at abstract reasoning and they are liable to make all kinds of errors. To illustrate, assuming that some dentists are drunkards and no cyclists are drunkards, does it follow that some cyclists are dentists? The answer is that it does not – but we may well struggle to see that this is true.

4 Intuition

Some of the things that we claim to know strike us as intuitively obvious. The trouble is that what is intuitively obvious to me may not be intuitively obvious to you. You only have to consider debates about such things as abortion or capital punishment to see the extent to which people may have conflicting intuitions on important issues. And it would surely be arrogant simply to assume that my intuitions are right and yours are wrong.

We can mention four other possible ways of knowing which, like those listed above, are important sources of knowledge, but may not be entirely reliable.

5 Memory

Our knowledge about the past is based on memory. Indeed, there is a sense in which *all* of our knowledge – intellectual as well as autobiographical – is based on memory. If we literally forgot everything, we would know nothing. Despite their

importance, our memories are notoriously unreliable and we often complain about them. We quickly forget the details of many of our experiences and sometimes even 'remember' things that never happened.

6 Emotion

Emotions play a crucial role in our lives and they shape and colour our perceptions and values. A person without emotions who was, say, unable to see a terrorist attack as frightening would surely be deficient in knowledge. At the same time, emotions can easily distort our perception of reality and act as an obstacle to, rather than a source of, knowledge. When angry people argue with one another, they produce a great deal of heat but very little light.

7 Imagination

Imagination is relevant to knowledge in that it is the source of creative ideas. A great deal of intellectual progress is the result not of discovering new things but of new ways of looking at existing things. Consider, for example, the famous insight by Copernicus (1473–1543) that the earth revolves around the sun rather than vice versa. However, when imagination is not tested against reality, there is a danger that we end up replacing public facts with private fantasies. The claim that the singer Michael Jackson faked his own death and is in fact still alive would seem to fit into this category.

8 Faith

For many people, faith is the basis for at least some of their knowledge claims about reality. Indeed, it could be argued that our most fundamental beliefs are ultimately matters of faith. Nevertheless, such knowledge claims contradict one another and what one person calls faith, another person might call superstition. In general, we may worry that, unless they are informed by reason, appeals to faith can be used to justify any belief.

RLS – Headline: 'Superstitions and Beliefs of Indian Space Scientists'. Are superstitions irrational?

Radical doubt

So far, we have raised some preliminary doubts about knowledge based on the eight ways of knowing mentioned above. But, following the French philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650), there is perhaps one statement that you think is absolutely certain – namely that 'I exist'. Surely that is something that cannot sensibly be doubted?

It could be argued that we cannot even be sure about that! In the 1998 movie *The Truman Show* a character called Truman Burbank lives on an island called Seahaven and leads an apparently ordinary life. As the movie progresses, we learn that Truman's entire life is being filmed 24 hours a day and broadcast live on TV, and that his wife, family, friends and acquaintances are all paid actors. Truman himself is unaware of

this and he mistakes his illusory world for reality. So how can you be certain that you are not living a Truman-Show-type life and that the people around you are not simply actors? Some philosophers have even speculated that the whole of life might be a dream. Perhaps you will awake in a few minutes and realise that you have been having the strangest dream in which you were a creature called a human being, living on a planet called Earth. Although such a radical supposition does not prove that you do not exist, it *does* suggest that your life might be completely different from what you thought.

ACTIVITY 1.4

1. Do you think it is seriously possible that you could be dreaming right now?
2. Do you think that some areas of knowledge are more certain than others?

Relativism

KT – relativism: the theory that people's ideas of what is true or valuable are not absolute but depend on their culture

Sometimes people react to this lack of certainty by swinging to the opposite extreme and embracing a position known as **relativism**. According to relativism, there is no such thing as absolute truth that exists in an objective way independent of what anyone happens to believe is true. Instead, truth is relative and may be different for different individuals or for different cultures. So rather than say that something is true or false in an unqualified way, the most we can do is say that it is 'true for me' or 'false for you'. Since there are no grounds for saying that one opinion is better than another, we must therefore conclude that all points of view are of equal value.

Since there are disputed questions in all areas of knowledge, relativism might at first seem an attractive position. Rather than insist that I am right and you are wrong, it is surely more attractive to say that one and the same knowledge claim can be true for me and false for you?

Despite its attractions, relativism leads to as many difficulties as equating knowledge with certainty. Consider the question of whether or not the earth is round. According to a relativist we would have to say it is true for me and false for a

Figure 1.6 Is everything relative?