

How Does One Know?

Samantha Cohen

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I know I was born on April 3, 1994 because that's what it says on my birth certificate. I know the feeling I would get in the pit of my stomach when I talk to a boy that I liked because I have felt it many times before. The way my throat chokes up a little and I can never think of the right things to say. I know how to ride a bike because I no longer fall when I'm on it. I know all the words to my favorite song because I have listened to it over 30 times on repeat. I know $2+2 = 4$ because I was taught to add numbers in elementary school. I know what I know by recalling past memories and experiences. I need to know why I know because if I don't understand that how can I ever fully trust and believe anything or anyone. And I don't want live in a world in which I constantly doubt everything around me.

Epistemology is the study of 'how do we know what we know?'. Most epistemologists study the larger concept of propositional knowledge, which is when something is either true or false. For instance, is space infinite, true or false? Most modern epistemologists study these open-ended concepts and put them into one of two categories, either true or false.¹ Rather than following this path, I went back in the origin of epistemology, how do we know anything? This was a hard road to go down because I found almost no "light" at the end of the tunnel. I discovered some answers, but none truly made me confident in my knowing anything. Rather I found ways to go back to where my knowledge originated.

Empiricism is a branch of epistemology. This philosophy does not question how we know, like epistemology, but rather provides one with an answer. Empiricism is the belief that all concepts/knowledge originates in experience, that any proposition is justified or known through experience.² That by recalling memories of past incident, or living through an event one can know it. Thus I know how to snowboard because I have physically done it before.

I believe that empiricism provides a large portion of evidence to how I know what I know. I believe that when I recall past experiences they affect what I do and do not know. For example if someone were to say that all gays try to convert every one to being gay, I would know that's not true because out of all my gay friends not one tried to "convert" me to become a lesbian. I know because of all my past experiences hanging out with my gay and lesbian friends. Through researching the philosophy of empiricism, I have been able to go back and find the source of my knowledge for many things but there is still a large portion of thing I don't know how I know them. As Donald Rumsfeld said, "There are *known knowns*. These are things we know that we know. There are *known unknowns*. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also *unknown unknowns*. There are things we don't know we don't know". He was referring to the war on Iraq but in fact I believe this statement to be very true with everyday life.

Rationalism is another branch of epistemology. This philosophy is the belief that reason is the main foundation and test of knowledge. Rationalists often are very logical in their ways of thinking, and they know through facts and reason. A rationalist's confidence in reason and proof often lead them away and or frown upon other ways of knowing, such as empiricism. This philosophy bases its self off of the justification condition to help support their reasons for knowing.³ To them, with out any justification through facts and reason they do not know anything. Plato was a rationalist. He believed that knowledge must be unchanging. He did not

¹ Fumerton, Richard A. *Epistemology*. N.p.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Print. Pg.2

² "empiricism." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 02 May. 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/186146/empiricism>>.

³ "rationalism." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 02 May. 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/492034/rationalism>>.

believe in empiricism due to the fact that it is primarily based on the concept that all knowledge is from memory and experiences.⁴ Both of those are ever changing and are never “for sure”.

I do not see myself as a rationalist. I believe that there is room for personal belief and opinions that play a role in my knowledge although I do rely on reason to help prove things I doubt. With facts and reason I can see how things that I originally don't believe and don't know can evolve into something that I do know.

The philosophy that doubts everything about, well, any philosophy is skepticism. Skepticism, relating to epistemology and the study of knowledge, ranges from questioning whether one can really ever know anything to questioning and pointing out the flaws in the philosophy.⁵ One of the first skeptics of epistemology was René Descartes. He, through meditation, discovered that one thing he would ever know for sure was his existence. As Descartes stated in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, “I can not doubt my own existence, in order to doubt or think there must be someone doing the doubting or the thinking”.

Skepticism is similar to how I viewed knowing towards the beginning of my investigation of epistemology. I recall walking into my room, telling my roommate, Lila, how I am questioning everything. I questioned how I knew where I was, whether Lila was real, how I knew a chair is in fact a chair. This went on for a few days. But I found that it may be good to question some things but not one's own existence, and that's when I discovered it's definitely not healthy to live the life of a Skeptic. I think Descartes was right when he stated we couldn't doubt our own existence, because if we doubt *that*, we will not be able to trust anything around us.

To know something is to believe it to be true. For some there needs to be fact and reasons for him or herself to know it. For others just to believe is enough. To state something as knowledge it must correspond with three conditions: belief, truth, and justification. First, the belief condition, this requires that anyone who knows that X (‘X’ stands for any proposition or statement) must also believe that X.⁶ If someone does not believe in something they will definitely not view it as true, thus they will not know it. For example, if I were to believe that there is a God, I would know that there is a God. There are many things that can affect belief too. There are epistemic reasons for believing, as well as pragmatic, moral and sometimes legal reasons for believing.⁷ Due to many different factors what one *knows* is ultimately very opinionated and completely different person to person.

The truth condition states that if one believes that X is true, they will believe that X. Therefore they will know that X.⁸ Lest say that I thought the moon landing did happen, then I would believe it to have happened thus I know it to be true. I could know that I believe something that is false, but I could never believe in the false statement or theory. Therefore I could not *know* this false statement.

The last condition is justification. That proposes that one needs epistemic justification (evidential support) to know that X.⁹ This means that with any knowledge we acquire there must

⁴ "epistemology." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 02 May. 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/190219/epistemology>>.

⁵ "skepticism." *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2011. Web. 02 May. 2011. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/547424/skepticism>>.

⁶ "epistemology." *The Cambridge Dictionary Of Philosophy*. Ed. Robert Audi. New York: The Press Syndicate of The University of Cambridge, 1995. Print.

⁷ Fumerton, Richard A. *Epistemology*. N.p.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006. Print. Pg.3

⁸ "epistemology." *The Cambridge Dictionary Of Philosophy*. Ed. Robert Audi. New York: The Press Syndicate of The University of Cambridge, 1995. Print.

⁹ "epistemology." *The Cambridge Dictionary Of Philosophy*. Ed. Robert Audi. New York: The Press Syndicate of The University of Cambridge, 1995. Print.

me some evidence to confirm it. For instance, I know the average adult laughs 17 times per day due to the statistic in an article I read.¹⁰ These conditions for knowing derive from the philosophy of epistemology.

What would you do if you found out all the things you knew were not true? All the memories you have laughing with friends, the math equations you were forced to memorize in 9th grade, even your birthday, were all lies. There would be no reason to live except to keep filling the role you have in your head. Would you act differently? Would you break the law knowing that the government was not real, would you treat people differently due to the fact they are only a figment of your imagination? These are the unanswerable questions in the world. These questions and confusions are why, I believe, gods were created. They were conceived to fill a void in peoples lives that would give them a moral code to live by because the consequences in “reality” were not enough. Epistemology and the way in which we question our knowing have created an uneasy platform for us to thrive on. When we as a human race begin to question what we know, we in turn are questioning who we are as a population. I believe that’s why we don’t question our knowledge as much as we do. As people we like a firm grasp on what we know, we back it up with different beliefs and logic, and we often come up with ways to defend our knowledge.

What would you do if you could trust everything that you know? That you would know for sure you like pepper on your salad, or your favorite color is blue. Would you ever waver in you thinking? Ever doubt your self? I believe that this is similar to how we live our life today. The safe way. We go day to day never questioning how we know the most basic of things. Humans are comforted by their own confidence in their knowledge. People seek confirmation about their knowledge constantly. This is demonstrated by the common addition of “you know?” to the end of a statement. Even if a person is sure of what they are saying, they may say this, seeking confirmation and reassurance of their knowledge. I am certain this is how I was living my life before I learned about epistemology. And why would I ever question my own knowing, it’s the one thing I should always be able to rely on. But I believe some form of questioning is necessary in everyday life because with out questioning our knowing we would loose our curiosity, and our want for learning. We would have no longer a need for school.

I will never know undoubtedly that a desk is a desk, that my best friend is not a figment of my imagination or that the reason for me being tone deaf is due to my parents’ lack of ability to sing. I will never know any of those things for sure, but I choose to live ignorantly. I want to live a life where I know everything that I know. Whether its from past memories and experiences or logic and statistics that back up the statement, I will believe to my best abilities that its indeed true. As Socrates said, “I am the wisest man alive, for I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing”¹¹.

¹⁰ Brain, Marshall. "How Laughter Works." Editorial. *Discovery Health*. N.p., n.d. Web. 2 May 2011. <<http://health.howstuffworks.com/mental-health/human-nature/other-emotions/laughter.htm>>.

¹¹ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/s/socrates.html#ixzz1LpeFLb6z>