

Contemporary Theories of
Knowledge

Second Edition

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For Cynthia, Mark, and Melissa

1

THE PROBLEMS
OF KNOWLEDGE

from
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1. Cognition

What sets human beings apart from other animals is their capacity for sophisticated thought. Only human beings are capable of the kinds of cognition required to build an airplane or a microwave oven, to write *Hamlet* or compose a symphony, to propound the Theory of Relativity or discover DNA. We have voluminous knowledge of the world, and most of that knowledge concerns matters other animals cannot even conceive of. How is it that we are able to engage in such sophisticated thought and arrive at the capacious knowledge that we use to direct both our everyday activities and our momentous achievements like flying to the moon or curing cancer? That is the subject matter of epistemology—the theory of knowledge.

What we want is to understand rational thought, from the routine to the sublime. We want to know how it is possible for us to accomplish the epistemic tasks upon whose results we base our lives and which other creatures find so impossible. We want to understand human beings as cognizers.

Cognitive psychology investigates certain aspects of human cognition through the methods of science. But our interest here is in specifically *rational* cognition. Psychologists study human thought when it goes wrong as well as when it goes right, but we want to know *what it is* for it to go right. What is it that makes human beings rational, and thereby makes our enormous intellectual achievements possible? The psychologist, in studying both rational and irrational thought, presupposes a pre-theoretic understanding of rationality, but does little to illuminate it. While we may marvel at the cognitive psychologist's use of sophisticated experiments to determine how human beings think, what it means to think rationally is a philosophical challenge. What we want is a general theory of rationality—what is it to be a rational cognizer, and how does being rational make it possible for us to acquire the wide variety of world knowledge that we take almost for granted? This is a philosophical question with a long and rich history.

Rational cognition includes more than the pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge has a purpose. It is to help us get around in the world. We use our knowledge to guide us in deciding how to act, and rational cognition includes the cognitive processes involved in action decisions. This book, however, will focus on the purely intellectual aspects of cognition that are involved in the pursuit of knowledge.

One of the remarkable conclusions of contemporary epistemology is that the rational thought responsible for our great intellectual achievements is not different in kind from the rational thought involved in routine epistemic procedures, like determining the color of an object seen in broad daylight, remembering your mother's name, discovering that most objects fall to the ground when unsupported, or summing 12 and 25. If we can understand how rational thought enables us to solve these routine epistemic problems, we can understand the discovery of DNA as the result of stringing together a large number of routine problems. What is extraordinary about human thought is already present in our ability to solve routine epistemic problems. Thus we begin by focusing on the mundane, in hopes that it will lead us to the sublime.

2. Skeptical Problems

Rather than ask, "How is it possible to discover DNA, or find a cure for cancer?", the epistemologist has traditionally begun by asking, "How is knowledge possible at all?" The philosophically inexperienced reader might find this puzzling, thinking to herself, "I know how to tell what color something is and how to remember my mother's name. I don't care about that. I want to know how to find a cure for cancer." Indeed, we all know how to perform simple epistemic tasks, but there is an important difference between knowing how to do it and knowing how it is done. We all know how to pick up a cup of coffee without spilling it, but imagine trying to give a precise description of how to do this sufficient to enable an engineer to build an industrial robot to accomplish the same task. In fact, engineers spent years trying to solve this very problem. Similarly, although we know how to perform simple epistemic tasks, it is extremely difficult to explain how we do and why what we do yields knowledge. Historically, philosophers have often motivated the study of simple epistemic tasks with the help of *skeptical arguments*. These are initially compelling arguments that seem to show that even simple epistemic tasks are impossible. Consider the following tale:

It all began that cold Wednesday night. I was sitting alone in my office watching the rain come down on the deserted streets outside, when the phone rang. It was Harry's wife, and she sounded terrified. They had been having a late supper alone in their apartment when suddenly the front door came crashing in and six hooded men burst into the room. The men were armed and they made Harry and Anne lay face down on the floor while they went through Harry's pockets. When they found his driver's license one of them carefully scrutinized Harry's face, comparing it with the official photograph and then muttered, "It's him all right." The leader of the intruders produced a hypodermic needle and injected Harry with something that made him lose consciousness almost immediately. For some reason they only fled and gogged Anne. Two of the

men left the room and returned with a stretcher and white coats. They put Harry on the stretcher, donned the white coats, and trundled him out of the apartment, leaving Anne lying on the floor. She managed to squirm to the window in time to see them put Harry in an ambulance and drive away.

By the time she called me, Anne was coming apart at the seams. It had taken her several hours to get out of her bonds, and then she called the police. To her consternation, instead of uniformed officers, two plain clothed officials arrived and, without even looking over the scene, they proceeded to tell her that there was nothing they could do and if she knew what was good for her she would keep her mouth shut. If she raised a fuss they would put out the word that she was a psycho and she would never see her husband again.

Not knowing what else to do, Anne called me. She had had the presence of mind to note down the number of the ambulance, and I had no great difficulty tracing it to a private clinic at the outskirts of town. When I arrived at the clinic I was surprised to find it locked up like a fortress. There were guards at the gate and it was surrounded by a massive wall. My commando training stood me in good stead as I negotiated the 20 foot wall, avoided the barbed wire, and silenced the guard dogs on the other side. The ground floor windows were all barred, but I managed to wriggle up a drainpipe and get in through a second-story window that someone had left ajar. I found myself in a laboratory. Hearing muffled sounds next door I peered through the keyhole and saw what appeared to be a complete operating room and a surgical team laboring over Harry. He was covered with a sheet from the neck down and they seemed to be connecting tubes and wires to him. I stifled a gasp when I realized that they had removed the top of Harry's head and eased his brain out, placing it in a stainless steel bowl. The tubes and wires I had noted earlier were connected to the now disembodied brain. The surgeons carried the bloody mass carefully to some kind of tank and lowered it in. My first thought was that I had stumbled on a covey of futuristic Satanists who got their kicks from vivisection. My second thought was that Harry was an insurance agent. Maybe this was their way of getting even for the increases in their malpractice insurance rates. If they did this every Wednesday night, their rates were no higher than they should be!

My speculations were interrupted when the lights suddenly came on in my darkened hidey hole and I found myself looking up at the scariest group of medical men I had ever seen. They manhandled me into the next room and strapped me down on an operating table. I thought, "Ult, oh, I'm in for it now!" The doctors huddled at the other end of the room, but I couldn't turn my head far enough to see what they were doing. They were numbing among themselves, probably deciding my fate. A door opened and I heard a woman's voice. The deferential manner assumed by the medical malpractioners made it obvious who was boss. I strained to see this mysterious woman but she hovered just out of my view. Then, to my astonishment, she walked up and stood over me and I realized it was my secretary, Margot. I began to wish I had given her

CHAPTER ONE

5

THE PROBLEMS OF KNOWLEDGE

you can be sure you are not a brain in a vat, because everything would seem just the same to you in either case. But if you cannot be sure you are not a brain in a vat, how can you trust the evidence of your senses? You have no way of knowing that they are not figments of a computer. It seems that you cannot really know anything about the world around you. It could all be an illusion. You cannot rule out the possibility that you are a brain in a vat, and without being able to rule out that possibility, knowledge of the material world is impossible.

that Christmas bonus after all.

It was Margot, but it was a different Margot than I had ever seen. She was wallowing in the heady wine of authority as she bent over me. "Well Mike, you thought you were so smart, tracking Harry here to the clinic," she said. Even now she had the sexiest voice I have ever heard, but I wasn't really thinking about that. She went on, "It was all a trick just to get you here. You saw what happened to Harry. He's not really dead, you know. These gentlemen are the premier neuroscientists in the world today. They have developed a surgical procedure whereby they remove the brain from the body but keep it alive in a vat of nutrient. The Food and Drug Administration wouldn't approve the procedure, but we'll show them. You see all the wires going to Harry's brain? They connect him up with a powerful computer. The computer monitors the output of his motor cortex and provides input to the sensory cortex in such a way that everything appears perfectly normal to Harry. It produces a fictitious mental life that merges perfectly into his past life so that he is unaware that anything has happened to him. He thinks he is shaving right now and getting ready to go to the office and stick it to another neurosurgeon. But actually, he's just a brain in a vat."

"Once we have our procedure perfected we're going after the head of the Food and Drug Administration, but we needed some experimental subjects first. Harry was easy. In order to really test our computer program we need someone who leads a more interesting and varied life—someone like you!" I was starting to squirm. The surgeons had drawn around me and were looking on with malevolent gleams in their eyes. The biggest brute, a man with a pockmarked face and one beady eye staring out from under his stringy black hair, was fondling a razor sharp scalpel in his still-bloodied hands and looking like he could barely restrain his excitement. But Margot gazed down at me and murmured in that incredible voice, "I'll bet you think we're going to operate on you and remove your brain just like we removed Harry's, don't you? But you have nothing to worry about. We're not going to remove your brain. We already did—three months ago!"

With that they let me go. I found my way back to my office in a daze. For some reason, I haven't told anybody about this. I can't make up my mind. I am racked by the suspicion that I am really a brain in a vat and all this I see around me is just a figment of the computer. After all, how could I tell? If the computer program really works, no matter what I do, everything will seem normal. Maybe nothing I see is real. It's driving me crazy. I've considered checking into that clinic voluntarily and asking them to remove my brain just so that I can be sure. Frankly, I don't know if even that would put my worries to rest.

Mike is luckier than most brain-in-a-vat victims. He at least has a clue to his precarious situation—Margot told him he is a brain in a vat. Of course, it could all be contrived. Perhaps he is not a brain in a vat after all. There is no way he can be sure. Meditating about this case, it may occur to you that you might be a brain in a vat, too. If you are, there is no way you could ever find out. Nor, it seems, is there any way

