

## **Is objective and absolute knowledge possible?**

The syllabus refers to the possibility of ‘objective and absolute knowledge’. ‘Objective’ and ‘absolute’ are intended as synonyms, contrasting with ‘relative’. The idea of ‘objective and absolute’ knowledge (from now on, ‘objectivism’) is the idea of knowledge that is not conditional or qualified. In particular, it is knowledge that is not relative to a system of beliefs, practices or concepts.

Relativism about values and religion is commonly defended. But we should not generalize; even if there is no objective knowledge of morality, this does not mean that there is no objective knowledge at all. Take, for example, the claim that ‘Mount Everest is the highest mountain on Earth’. Is this truth relative to cultures? If a culture, never having heard of Mount Everest, claimed that Mont Blanc was the highest mountain on Earth, would they be mistaken? To argue that objectivism is mistaken, you have to show that even scientific knowledge can’t be objective.

It is important to note the difference between relativism and scepticism. Scepticism denies there is knowledge, but relativism claims that there is knowledge, i.e. that there are beliefs that can rightly be said to be true and known to be true; but knowledge is relative to a society, theory, or conceptual scheme. The standard argument for relativism is that societies and theories can disagree over knowledge claims without there being any way in which the disagreement can be resolved in favour of one or the other.

### **PLATO’S OBJECTIVISM**

Plato argues that knowledge of ‘particular things’ gained through the senses cannot be objective and absolute. Particular things will always both be X – have some property, e.g. beauty or largeness – and not-X, either at different times, or to different observers, or in different contexts. They are what they are (beautiful, large, etc.) only relatively and transiently, so there cannot be knowledge of them. Knowledge needs more permanence and certainty.

Part of Plato’s argument is that knowledge can’t be mistaken. However, if you believe of anything that can change, that it is one way rather than another – that it is beautiful rather than ugly, say – you could be wrong, because it is possible for it to be either. It is only contingently beautiful. Everything that we experience with our senses is contingent; it can exist or not, it can have this property or not, and it will change from one state to another. But knowledge, says Plato, cannot change (though beliefs can). [Margin: Outline Plato’s argument that we cannot have objective and absolute knowledge of particular things.]

However, this does not mean that there is no objective and absolute knowledge. There is – we can have such knowledge of the Forms. In contrast to particular beautiful things, the Form of beauty is beautiful under all conditions, to all observers, at all times. The Form of beauty is pure beauty; it alone is not both beautiful and not beautiful.

Plato argues that if we consider the many things that are X, we shall form beliefs about them, but cannot acquire knowledge; whereas if we consider the unchanging Form of X, we acquire knowledge and understanding. As science investigates the world through sense experience, then Plato would claim science cannot produce knowledge, but only belief.

Plato is making two claims: that we can have knowledge of the Forms, and that we can't have knowledge of particular things. We shall discuss only the second claim.

## **KNOWLEDGE AND CONTINGENCY**

Plato might be right that knowledge cannot change (it can't go from truth to falsehood), but that doesn't mean the object of knowledge can't change. For example, I can know (it seems) that a particular object of sense experience – this book – has a particular property, e.g. it is a certain size, at a particular time, even though its size can change. Once we understand the relation between knowledge and time correctly, we can see that knowledge doesn't change even if what it is knowledge of changes. 'Mount Everest is the tallest mountain on Earth' – this was not always true, but it is true now – so it is always true that 'Mount Everest was the tallest mountain on Earth in 2009'.

What about his idea that knowledge must be certain? Hume argues that most of our beliefs about matters of fact can never be certain, but only probable. Our most certain empirical beliefs are about what we ourselves have experienced. However, past experience can give me 'direct and certain information of those precise objects only, and that precise period of time, which feel under its cognizance'. (*An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, p. 114) Much of what we think we know, e.g. about Mount Everest, goes beyond personal experience. This presents two challenges to objectivism about scientific knowledge.

First, how can we infer from what we have experienced to what we haven't experienced? We have to assume, says Hume, that the two are similar, e.g. that the future will be like the past, that parts of the world we haven't experienced operate the same way as parts we have. But, of course, things may not be the same, or they may change. But this poses a particular problem for science, which claims to discover universal laws of nature. We can never establish these with certainty, because we can only show, at best, that they apply to what we have experienced. Any claim about what we haven't experienced can only have a better or worse degree of probability.

Second, we may have made a mistake even about what we have experienced. Scientific progress shows that even what people believe to be obviously true at one point in time may turn out to be false. For example, the Sun does not move around the Earth. So is it not possible that anything we are currently certain of could in the future be shown to be false? Furthermore, as so much of our knowledge depends on testimony – what other people tell us – we also have to assume that people are generally reliable. But people are fallible, and sometimes deliberately deceptive; important mistakes in experiments have been made. Again, at best, we can only hold our beliefs as probably true.

However, none of this shows that we don't have objective scientific knowledge unless we assume, with Plato, that knowledge must be certain. This assumption is infallibilism, which we should reject in favour of the view that knowledge only requires good grounds. To argue that our beliefs are fallible is not to show either that they don't amount to

knowledge or to show that knowledge is relative. What it does show is that no claim is established finally, once and for all and that those claims which are overturned in the future, we cannot be said to know now. Yet we still have very good reason to believe that certain claims will not be overturned, e.g. the claim that stars are burning balls of gas or that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. The evidence is so decisive that what could overturn these claims is simply unimaginable to us now.

## **CONCEPTUAL SCHEMES AND OBJECTIVE KNOWLEDGE**

Objective knowledge, we can argue, should be knowledge of how things (really) are. All knowledge uses concepts – ‘mountain’, ‘highest’, ‘electron’, ‘table’ and so on. Concepts only identify ‘how things are’ if there is a correlation between reality and the set of concepts. A claim can only amount to objective knowledge if the concepts it uses are concepts that correspond to reality. Claims employing concepts that don’t correspond to reality, e.g. ‘witch’, can’t give us knowledge because the concept has no application. So objective knowledge is only possible if we have the concepts which correspond to how reality is.

We can then argue that it is impossible to claim that there is a single set of concepts which describes reality ‘as it is’ and better than any other set of concept, or that our concepts are part of such a perfect set. Therefore, the knowledge we have is relative to our conceptual scheme, and not objective.

These ideas can be illustrated by idea of scientific progress, as described by relativism. The concepts science has employed has changed, with old concepts being abandoned and new ways of thinking being developed. For example, for around 100 years from 1667, there was a theory that aimed to explain how and why things burn in terms of an element called ‘phlogiston’. But it was shown that there is no such thing as phlogiston, and burning actually involves (the newly discovered element) oxygen. Or again, the difference between living and non-living things was explained in terms of a ‘vital force’. The rise of modern biological theory in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century showed that there is no ‘vital force’. Even concepts of space and time have changed, from Newton’s theory that they are ‘absolute’ to Einstein’s theory that they are ‘relative’. So concepts that are once central become abandoned or reinterpreted. How then can we think that the set of concepts we now use identify how reality ‘really’ is?

We can develop the argument. Conceptual schemes are schemes of classification. Concepts identify similarities and differences. But while some schemes of classification can seem more natural or useful or simple, these values are ours, and are not given to us by reality itself. So how can we identify the ‘true’ structure of reality? Prior to classification, we cannot speak of reality as itself composed of different kinds of thing. Unless there is a conceptual scheme that we must have, that ‘carves nature at the joints’, then we cannot claim that our knowledge is ‘objective’. It is relative to our conceptual scheme, and this is, in an important sense, optional. First, it can change, so that we cease to believe in a classification we used previously. Second, it depends on our particular types of sense experience. Creatures with different forms of perception could form different concepts to describe reality without in any way being mistaken. No one set of concepts and theories that can be said to classify reality absolutely.

But scientific progress can also be understood in a way that undermines this argument. As science develops, it creates concepts and theories that come closer and closer to

identifying how reality is 'in itself'. It approaches an 'absolute conception of the world'. We discover that certain concepts, such as phlogiston and vital force, fail to make sense of the world, and we replace them with better concepts. And we also develop concepts that depend less and less on our particular sensory abilities, such as the concepts of subatomic physics. Concepts of electrons, leptons and so on, we can argue, pick out the fundamental structure of reality, and so they are not optional in any true description of the world. They are not specifically related to vision, touch, hearing and so on. Our knowledge is becoming more and more objective.

## **NIETZSCHE'S PERSPECTIVISM**

Nietzsche argues that our beliefs are based upon our most fundamental values. He uses the term 'perspective' to capture the idea of a set of beliefs grounded on values. Different perspectives are defined by different values; differences in belief are not themselves enough. Two people with different religious beliefs, for instance, may occupy the same perspective if their beliefs reflect the same underlying set of values.

This applies even to sense perception, which we might expect to be most responsive to how the world is (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §192). First, we find it easier, argues Nietzsche, to reproduce an image we are familiar with than to remember what is new and different in our sense impression. We are averse to new things, and so already, our experience of the world is dominated by an emotion. Familiar emotions – what we fear or love – will affect what we see. Second, we cannot take in everything – we do not see every leaf on a tree, but out of our visual experience, create for ourselves an image of something approximating the tree. We do the same for everything we experience; our emotions affect this process. Third, whenever a new idea or experience arises, people become over-excited, impatient to develop or experience it. Over time, we become more cautious, see it more for what it is.

Philosophy has tended to defend objectivism and deny perspective. Many philosophers have thought that we can achieve 'unconditional' truth and represent the world as it is independent of our perspective, our values. But this is a distortion itself based on certain values. Nietzsche's view is that perspective cannot be eliminated, i.e. values cannot cease to guide our knowledge, and that the attempt to eliminate it completely is misguided.

However, he argues that some perspectives are less distorting than others. First, a perspective may be aware that it is a perspective. Becoming aware of the perspectival nature of knowledge is itself an improvement in knowledge. Second, we can find a less perspectival perspective by assembling many different perspectives: 'perspectival 'knowing' [is] the only kind of 'knowing'; and the more feelings about a matter which we allow to come to expression, the more eyes, different eyes through which we are able to view this same matter, the more complete our 'conception' of it, our 'objectivity' will be.' (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, III §12) We need to be flexible, not trapped by one set of values or the illusion of value-free knowing, but able to move from one valuational perspective to another, and from these many points of view, assemble our picture of the world.