

KNOWLEDGE, BELIEF AND THE TEACHER

by

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The definition of knowledge and its relation to belief is one of the central questions of the theory of knowledge. The question is of significance not only for the epistemologist but also for the classroom teacher as it has certain practical implications. In practical terms the difference between knowledge and belief could easily mean the difference between teaching and indoctrination. If, with R.S. Peters, we define indoctrination as "the result of teaching false or unjustified doctrines or beliefs"¹ we at once see the need for drawing a clear distinction between knowledge and belief.

Indoctrination is generally regarded as being inferior to education. Indeed, indoctrination is sometimes said to be "symmetrically opposed to education".² Education promotes and enhances critical thinking whereas indoctrination discourages it. The true educator must be on his guard against indoctrinating his subjects. One way of doing this is by thoroughly scrutinizing his content to ensure that he does not subject his pupils to his own unjustified opinions, beliefs or prejudices.

This paper examines Plato's attempt to draw such a distinction. Plato is not the only philosopher who has addressed this problem but he was undoubtedly the first, and in our opinion, the most original. Here, more than anywhere else, A.N. Whitehead was clearly right in observing that all the modern philosophers have done is to add footnotes to the philosophy of Plato. The solutions offered by modern philosophers to the problem of knowledge and belief are no more than re-statements, modifications and affirmations of Plato's original answer. This is in part the justification for re-examining Plato's distinction in this paper.

It is now commonly assumed that knowledge differs from belief. This has not always been the case. It was Plato who first made a clear distinction between these two. That the philosopher drew a sharp distinction between knowledge and belief is abundantly clear in his dialogues. The question of distinction is first raised in **Gorgias**³ and it appears to be maintained throughout Plato's writings.

In the **Meno**,⁴ Plato, through Socrates, explicitly claims to know that knowledge and opinion are different things. It is noteworthy that Plato should put such a claim in the mouth of Socrates who was at all times known to have denied knowledge of anything. "I know only one thing and that is I know nothing".

In the same dialogue the philosopher attempts to locate belief in-between complete ignorance and complete knowledge. This is the germ of what will come to complete maturation in the fifth Book of the **Republic**. In **Meno**⁵ usefulness or utility is suggested as a possible criterion for distinguishing between knowledge and true belief. This suggestion is, however, rejected on the basis that true belief is no less useful in practical affairs than is true knowledge. It will be useful in practice, to believe that road A leads to Thika as to know that it does so. In this dialogue Plato comes to the conclusion that the real difference between knowledge and belief is the former's ability to give an account of itself. True beliefs, when "tethered" by a reckoning of the cause become knowledge. Knowledge then is no more than true belief with an account.

This view is further strengthened in the dialogue **Thaetetus**. Here Plato suggests that the superiority of knowledge over true belief lies in its seeking and giving account of itself.⁶ An eye-witness may persuade the jury to form a true belief of the matter but this would not amount to knowledge of the fact. The magistrate may form a true belief of what happened but this is not the same as knowing what really happened. Knowledge is not just true belief together with good reason for that belief. If a man cannot give account of what he knows then he cannot be said to know it.⁷ Good reason or account then is a necessary condition for knowledge.

The implication of this Platonic doctrine is that in all instances of knowing, the knower must understand why a given situation is the way it is. To know X is to understand why that X is X and not Y or Z. To know a fact is to be in a position to explain that fact. To know is to comprehend the **why** of things. But to comprehend the **why** of a thing is to grasp its essence (ousia). To know is to come to grips with the essence, the being, the reality of a thing or situation.

The classical difficulty with this argument (and Plato himself does mention this) is that it leads to a vicious infinite regress. If the proposed definition of knowledge were to be strictly adhered to we

would end up with circularity. To avoid this, it is sometimes claimed that all knowledge based on good reasons must terminate in non-inferential knowledge, or knowledge that is not based upon any reasons at all.⁸

In the **Republic** we are told that belief has to do with Becoming or genesis whereas knowledge has to do with Being or ousia (essence)⁹. In-between these two states are true beliefs which are the products of correct guessing. A man who correctly guesses a given situation but who does not comprehend the **why** of this fact has true belief but no knowledge of the situation. Knowledge is a result of conscious or deliberate effort. There is not such a thing as knowledge by chance or unconscious knowledge. Knowledge like joy is a personal and conscious experience. The knower must be personally and actively involved in the process of knowing. In this sense it is inaccurate to say that a teacher "transmits" or gives knowledge to his pupils. Belief, on the other hand, need not be a conscious affair. To say that A believes does not entail that he is conscious of his mental disposition. The believer, unlike the knower or the perceiver, need not be consciously aware of his belief at the moment of believing.¹⁰

In the **Timaeus** Plato distinguishes knowledge and belief on the basis of the manner in which they are formed. He argues that knowledge is a product of instruction whereas belief results from persuasion.¹¹ Because knowledge has an account of itself it is unshakeable by persuasion. But knowledge is a rare thing - so rare indeed that according to Plato it was only possessed by the gods and by very few men (the philosophers).

This argument raises a number of problems. In the first place some kinds of knowledge such as self-knowledge or introspective knowledge seem to be outside the scope of instruction. Self-knowledge does not seem to come about as a result of instruction. Secondly, it is possible for a person to be unwittingly subjected to false instruction. And this leads us to another interesting question. Is it possible to **know** a falsehood? Is it possible to have knowledge of a situation which does not in fact obtain? Is it possible to know X in a situation where there is no X? This question bears on what has come to be called the truth condition of knowledge. This condition applies especially to propositional knowledge. One cannot truly claim to know a given proposition P unless that proposition is true in the first place. You

cannot know P if P is not true. In the same way it is contradictory to claim "I know P but P is false". It may well be that I only believe P to be the case but I do not in fact know it to be so.

It was Plato who first drew attention to this fact. To know is to know something. No one truly knows nothing. If you know you must know something which in fact is the case. In the fifth Book of the **Republic** the philosopher is adamant on this fact. "Whatever fully is, is fully knowable while that which in no way is (completely is not) is completely unknowable".¹²

The Argument of Book V, as the **Republic** passage is commonly called, raises two interesting questions about knowledge and ignorance. First, there is the matter of fallibility. Plato tells us that knowledge is infallible while belief is fallible.¹³ This in essence means that knowledge is always true. Knowledge can never be false or mistaken. You cannot know a thing and be mistaken about it. If a person claims to know that today is Sunday and if in fact it turns out to be a Monday then that person must withdraw his claim to knowledge. At best this man has a mistaken belief (no matter how strong) that today is Sunday. His state of mind is one of (strong) belief but not of knowledge.

Related to this problem is the possibility of unconscious knowledge. Quite often one hears well-meaning teachers encourage their students by saying such things as "Well done. You see, you knew the answer all along, only you did not know that you knew". But if one does not in fact know that one knows, can one be said to really know? Isn't knowledge a matter of conscious awareness, a conscious state of cognition? Can a knower know and yet not know that he knows? According to Plato such a man has only belief and not knowledge.

In modern times this position has been restated by H.A. Prichard:

We must recognise that whenever we know something we either do, or at least can, by reflecting, directly know that we are knowing it, and whenever we believe something we similarly either do or can directly know that we are believing it and not knowing it.¹⁴

The second problem of the argument of Book V is the question of the objects of knowledge and belief. It has been said that knowledge and belief are different cognitive modes. What does this mean in terms of

their objects? Are the objects of knowledge different from those of belief or do the two modes operate on the same objects? To put the question differently, what things are knowable and what things are opinable (believable)?

Ordinarily, such questions make little sense. Most people “know” that the objects of knowledge and those of belief are the same. But then philosophical questions are not ordinary questions. Plato taught that knowledge and belief are different “faculties” or functions and as such they must operate on different objects.¹⁵ By a series of complicated and controversial logical steps the philosopher arrived at the conclusion that knowledge and belief are different functions dealing with different objects and yielding different results. The objects of knowledge are the pure Forms or Ideas while those of belief are the ordinary objects of sense experience. Only the Forms are knowable. The objects of sense can in no way be known. We cannot know physical objects any more than we can smell a sound or hear a smeli.

What Plato is saying here is that it is impossible for a thing to be the object of both knowledge and belief. A given thing is either knowledge or it is opinable (believable) but not both.

This Platonic position is rather difficult to accept. Why may one not start by believing in a thing and end up knowing that thing? Why is it not possible for A to have only a belief of what B has knowledge? Is it not possible to start by believing that the earth is flat and end up knowing that it is round?

The problem here has to do with Plato's conception of reality. By definition the realm of the Forms is the world of the intelligible or the knowable. This is the realm represented by the Upper Line, the Sun and the outside of the Cave. Only the Forms can be known. Everything else is only a subject of belief or opinion. This conclusion is a logical outcome of the powerful synthesis of Plato's metaphysics with his epistemology. His theory of Forms is not just an ontological but also an epistemological explanation of the universe.

Clearly Plato's theory of knowledge creates the problem of compatibility of knowledge and belief. One cannot believe P and know P since the objects of belief are very different from those of knowledge. You either know a thing or you believe it. And since knowing is on a higher

epistemological status than belief it would appear superfluous to continue believing something we already know. On the other hand, belief may be part of knowing. If that is the case then one cannot know without believing. But if this latter is the case then the object of knowledge is also the object of belief.

Modern theories of knowledge, while maintaining that knowledge is different from belief, tend to see a close connection between them. As we saw above, one of the conditions of knowledge is that the known thing (proposition) be true. Apart from this condition there is also what is called the belief condition or the subjective requirement of knowledge. According to this, not only must a given proposition be true but it must also be believed to be true. No one who sincerely asserts that "P is true but I do not believe it" can be said to know P. This is because believing is a defining characteristic of knowing and while there may be beliefs which do not amount to knowledge, there cannot be knowledge without belief.

It is difficult if not impossible to uphold the claim that knowledge and belief are one and the same. It is rather obvious that knowing a thing is different from merely believing or being convinced about it. Belief, unlike knowledge, is a psychological state which does not require the truth for its existence. What is not so obvious about knowledge and faith is the nature of their difference.

Is the difference one of degree or of type? Does knowledge differ from belief only in type as fast movement differs from slow movement, or does it differ in kind as red differs from blue?

Crombie¹⁶ has shown Plato's position to be ridiculous. Plato argues that the objects of knowledge are different from those of belief (doxa) since the two are different functions (faculties) and must perform different tasks. The function of knowledge is infallible while that of belief is fallible. But about what is this fallibility or infallibility? Knowledge, it would appear to us, is an infallible cognitive function in relation to the world, reality, or truth while belief is a fallible cognitive function in relation to the same world, reality or truth. The cave inhabitants with their minds set on material goods have only a belief about the "Good" whereas the philosopher has true knowledge of that "Good". The prisoners enjoy what they mistakenly perceive to be the good while the philosopher enjoys that which in truth (objectively) is the good. The philosophers thus have knowledge of

what the prisoners have only a belief (*doxa*). It appears then quite possible to have knowledge or opinion of the same object in much the same way as we may have taste and smell of the same thing e.g. an orange. This appears even more probable in the case of true belief, a point that is adequately demonstrated in Plato's own example of the knowledge of the eyewitness and the true belief of the jury.¹⁷ This example clearly demonstrates that knowledge and true belief have the same objects. Indeed influenced by this, some scholars such as Hintikka¹⁸ have suggested that Plato did not make the distinction between knowledge and true belief.

There seems to be no solid grounds for denying that we can successfully believe and know the same object. I believe it is raining when I hear rain drops on my roof. I know it is raining when I open the window, look outside, put out my hand and get wet. The object of both functions is the same - the rain. It is clear then that what at first was only a belief now turns out to be knowledge. The difference between the two is one of confirmation or verification by means of evidence or grounds.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The concept of teaching implies at least five things.¹⁹ For teaching to take place there must be a teacher. If there is no teacher there can be no teaching even though some learning could take place. Secondly, teaching cannot take place if there is no student or learner. The act of teaching would be incomplete if the teacher were to go through the motions in the absence of a recipient. Third, there must be some content to be transmitted from the teacher to the student. This content may be in the form of knowledge, skills, attitudes, or values. In the absence of content teaching cannot take place. We cannot teach nothing. To teach is to transmit something. Fourth, teaching involves intentions, goals or aims. There is no such thing as "accidental" teaching. Teaching does not just occur. It must be intended. Finally, the process by which knowledge, values, attitudes, or skills are transmitted must be morally acceptable or pedagogically sound. This means that the teacher must adopt methods that fully recognise the rational nature of the student. The teacher must respect his student as a rational being, as one capable of thinking and forming his own opinions.

It is the third of these requirements (content) that we wish to address more specifically here. What sort of content is the subject of knowledge and why is this question important for the teacher?

Perhaps we should start by re-stating what we have already asserted above. Only that which is true is knowable. What this means is that one cannot justifiably claim knowledge of lies, half-truth, or of anything else that is not strictly true. By extension, if a teacher's task is to help bring about knowledge, he must deal with only that which is wholly true.

Now, what about the teacher who either deliberately or out of ignorance "teaches" falsehood? Supposing his students, trusting wholly in his "wisdom", do innocently assimilate these falsehoods. Can they be said to have acquired knowledge? Can one in fact teach that which is not true? If so, does that kind of teaching amount to knowledge?

One thing seems quite clear. Even if the teacher manages to "teach" a pack of lies or falsehood and even if the learner or recipient of this "teaching" were to accept this "teaching" it would not amount to knowledge simply because that which is not true is not knowable. What is not so clear is whether in fact it is even possible to "teach" something which is not true. Grammatically, of course, there is no problem in stating that one was taught a lie. The black men, for example, were taught (and often accepted) that they were inferior to the white men. Grammatically then the term "teaching" can apply equally to truth and falsehood. On the logical and analytical level, however, the matter is more complicated.

The concept of teaching, like that of knowledge, implies an element of value. Knowledge is associated with the valuable, the worthwhile, the important or significant. Likewise, "teaching" implies value, meaning, and truth. In its normative sense the term teaching refers to the activity of "guiding" or "leading". Accordingly, the activity of the teacher is to "lead" or "guide" the students to knowledge. But one who deliberately or otherwise "teaches" a child false things cannot be said to guide that child or lead him to knowledge. On the contrary, such a one is said to **mislead** or **misguide** the young ones. No knowledge can result from such an activity.

The implication of this situation for the teacher should be obvious. We can properly be said to teach or educate only when we are involved in the truth. The basic condition for teaching/educating is the truth. If we are involved in the dissemination of half-truths or untruths we are indoctrinating, brainwashing, training, drilling, etc, but by no means educating. And since the teacher's primary motive is to educate the youth he is duty-bound to ensure the truth value of the content that he presents to his subjects.

Nor does it follow that once the truth has been told learning/education has taken place. As indicated above, other factors such as motives or goals as well as the method of teaching must also be taken into account. Truth is the minimum requirement but it is by no means a sufficient condition for knowledge. Without it, however, the other conditions do not amount to much. No matter how convinced we may be that we hold the truth and no matter how well-intentioned we maybe, we shall not be educating the youth unless and until our content is in fact truthful.

This, of course, does not mean that there is no room for the teacher's personal opinion and beliefs. Every person is entitled to his or her own personal beliefs and this does not exclude the teacher. However, in the teaching situation the teacher is expected to be honest in presenting his views or opinions. He must always make it clear that the views he presents are his own personal views/beliefs which need not be true. The teacher should be tolerant of the views of others and should indeed encourage his students to form their own beliefs/opinions and to offer logical support for them. The responsible teacher must at all times resist the temptation of bull-doing his prejudices in the name of teaching or knowledge. Knowledge is of what is, not of beliefs and opinions.

FOOTNOTES

1. Peters, R.S. **Ethics and Education**, London, 1966, p.41.
2. Kleining, J. **Philosophical Issues in Education**, Kent: Croom, 1982, p.65.
3. **Gorgias**, 454
4. **Meno**, 986

5. **Meno**, 98
- 6 **Theaetetus**, 200d-201c
- 7 **Theaetetus**, 202c
- 8 Armstrong, D.M. **A Materialist Theory of Mind**, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968, p.188
- 9 **Republic**, 534a
- 10 Armstrong, **op. cit.** pp.214, 232
- 11 **Timaeus**, 519d
- 12 **Republic**, 477a
- 13 **Ibid.** 477d-e
- 14 Prichard, H.A. **Knowledge and Perception**, Oxford, 1950, p.88.
- 15 **Republic**, 478a-b
16. Crombie, I.M. **An Examination of Plato's Doctrines, Vol. I.** London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, p.57
17. **Theaetetus**, 201a-c
- 18 Hintikka, J. **Knowledge and the Known**, Dordrecht - Holland: D. Reidel, 1974, p.27
- 19 Hirst, H.P. "What is Teaching?" **Journal of Curriculum Studies** Vol. 3, No I (May 1971) pp. 12-13.