

BELIEF, KNOWLEDGE AND REALITY

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Abstract

This article undertakes a critical philosophical examination of the interrelated concepts of belief, knowledge, and reality within the framework of epistemology and metaphysics. It begins by situating the discussion within classical and contemporary theories of knowledge, highlighting epistemology's concern with the justification, scope, and certainty of human knowledge claims. The primary objective of the study is to clarify the conceptual distinctions and connections between belief and knowledge, and to explore how these are grounded in differing conceptions of reality. Methodologically, the article adopts a conceptual-analytical approach, engaging key philosophical positions from both classical and modern thinkers, including Aristotelian realism, empiricism, process philosophy, and contemporary epistemological accounts of justified true belief. The analysis reveals that while belief is a necessary component of knowledge, it is not sufficient without truth and justification, and that many epistemic errors arise from the conflation of belief with knowledge. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that conceptions of reality, whether substance-based or process-oriented profoundly shape epistemological commitments and standards of justification. It also shows that cultural and contextual factors influence belief systems, though not all truth claims are reducible to relativism. The article concludes that a critical interrogation of beliefs, grounded in evidential support and a coherent understanding of reality, is essential for distinguishing knowledge from mere opinion. Such philosophical vigilance is necessary not only for theoretical clarity but also for responsible action in practical life.

Keywords: Consciousness, Justification, Belief, Knowledge, Reality

Introduction

Philosophical reflection on belief, knowledge, and reality lies at the very heart of epistemology and metaphysics. Whenever questions are raised about what humans can know, how they know it, and whether such knowledge corresponds to what truly exists, the inquiry inevitably turns to the theory of knowledge. Epistemology is fundamentally concerned with the justification and validity of human knowledge claims, interrogating the grounds upon which we assert that we know something rather than merely believe it. Closely allied to this inquiry is metaphysics, which examines the nature and structure of reality itself and the relationship between mind and world. The persistent difficulty in epistemological discourse arises from the apparent ambiguity of key concepts such as 'knowing', 'believing', and 'being'. While knowledge is often characterised as justified true belief, philosophical debates reveal deep disagreements about the sufficiency of this account and the precise conditions under which belief may be elevated to knowledge. These debates are further complicated by sceptical challenges that question whether certainty is ever attainable and whether reality exists independently of human cognition. Moreover, philosophical conceptions of reality have evolved significantly from substance-based metaphysics to relational and process-oriented accounts, each carrying distinct epistemological implications. What is taken to be real inevitably influences what is considered knowable. This article therefore explores belief, knowledge, and reality not as isolated notions but as mutually implicating concepts. By critically examining their interconnections, the study seeks to clarify the conditions under which human cognition can responsibly claim access to reality, while also highlighting the dangers of unexamined belief and epistemic complacency.

Belief, Knowledge and Reality

When mention is made of reality, belief and knowledge, the mind is deliberately dragged or moved to Epistemology, Theory of Knowledge, Gneoseology or Cristeriology. Theory of knowledge is concerned with the justification of human knowledge, questioning the status and extent of our knowledge of the world, ourselves and others.¹ In short, we want to know we are sure what we mean when we hold we know this or that object. Simply put, in the words of Eboh, epistemology is interested in questions about what minds work on, what their material is, what their relation is to objects in the external world, to other persons' minds, to the events of history and so on one the purpose of theory of knowledge is to inquire into the rational grounds and ultimate reasons of our "spontaneous convictions" by means of a critical examinations.²

Theory of knowledge thrives by proposing grounds and conditions for elucidation of the concepts we embrace and romance in our bid to know, raising questions which are general yet basic to the business of knowledge and this art

and act of knowing. It wants to know the range of knowledge that is possible, independent of experience and in what forms. Eboh insists that by asking these questions it is obvious that all the problems of theory of knowledge arise against and by contrast with a quite different point of view- philosophical skepticism which claims that knowledge is impossible, or at least that we can never be sure that we have attained it, or the theory of knowledge is concerned not simply with the nature and scope of knowledge but with justification of claims to knowledge.³

Now we may turn our attention to our bed fellows and interrogate them in order to feel their pulses and understudy them. We first turn to knowledge. What is knowledge? What does it mean to know? This question is cardinal, for if it is unanswered we will continue to be in the wood. Eboh emphasizes unless it is answered it is impossible to rule out erroneous theories based on misconceptions of what it is to know something.⁴ Ogugua states that knowledge is a primary act of experience, hence very difficult to define, we can easily show instances of knowledge but not a definition of knowledge,⁵ by implication, we have definitions of knowledge.

Eboh expressed the ambiguity of the word to “know”. Epistemologists tend to question and ask, can one really “know”,⁶ know anything as to get information that cannot be doubted. Does one’s knowledge represent objects as they are or are these objects real outside one’s mind? Are we still doubting whether we can really know after Aristotle had expressly stated that all men desire by nature to know? This means that we cannot avoid it, it is engrained in our being to desire and crave to know, we have the natural tendency or propensity to know. George Chatalian maintains that the desire to know whether then know, how much then know, how much they can know and what is to know. The instinct for knowing is inherent in all men. The tendency of the human mind to engage in epistemological reflection and inquiry is as natural as the tendency of the human mind to engage in philosophical reflection and inquiry in general⁸. It is this desire to know that propels man to engage in thought, wonderment and eventually philosophize to crown his inquisitiveness. This enquiry is a full inquiry into the nature of knowledge and should include inquiry into all the conditions and causes of knowledge, sciences concerned with the nature of mind, the nervous system, the human body and all of the conditions of those things become involved⁹. Other disciplines inquire into knowledge, but epistemology does it differently, for it is a study of a very special kind, attempting to know, that is known knowledge, to have insights into insights, to understand understanding and to frame a science about science¹⁰. Coffey makes a distinction, while the aim of the various human sciences and of the other departments of philosophy is to extend our knowledge, the aim of epistemology is not exactly extension of our knowledge, but perfection of the knowledge acquired by teaching what it is to know¹¹. There is no doubt, this is more foundational and fundamental.

We now know that we can use the word ‘know’ in many senses or ways to show acquaintance, familiarity with people or place; to experience something; to master something- having a special form of competence¹². Bittle holds that to know is at par with ‘to see’, ‘to touch’ ‘to kill’, ‘to imagine’, ‘to taste’, etc, but it will be erroneous to liken knowledge to the subjective states of our being, so some conditions need to be in place for one to really claim to have known. Hamlyn asserts: “...one condition of being said to know something is that what one claims to know must be the case; if it is an object that one claims to know, this must exist, and if what one claims to know is formulable in a proposition, this must be true¹³.”

He insists that a thing is known if

1. I believed it
2. I had good ground on which to base the belief and
3. The belief was true

John Hospers states:

The moment you have some reasons to believe that a proposition is not true, this immediately negates a person’s claim to know it; you cannot know ‘X’ if X is not true. If I say I know ‘X’, but ‘X’ is not true, my statement is self-contradictory for part of what is involved in knowing ‘X’ is that ‘X’ is true.¹⁴

Quinton holds that knowledge is “a justified true belief”.¹⁵ Our grounds and conditions are insufficient if what we hold to be true turns out false. There is really a subjective angle in knowledge. Hospers adds, we must have a certain attitude towards ‘X’, not merely that of wondering or speculating about “X”, but positively believing that “X” is true. I know that X is true, but I do not believe that it is, would not only be a very peculiar thing to say, it would entitle our hearers to conclude that we have not learned in what circumstances to use the word “know.”¹⁶ Ogugua however maintains that, when we have a clear and distinct perception of something, the mental state by which we accomplish this is what is called knowledge. Perception is a complex notion, it has to do with sensory experience and intellectual notions. By

implication, knowledge involves series of activities. Perception is therefore an “achievement” word for we can only perceive that which is real, what- there is. Knowledge therefore cannot be of what is not. He continues:

Knowledge cannot take place unless there is someone (a being) that knows and something to be perceived or known.... Having knowledge therefore becomes knowing what something is and having understanding of something means understanding the meaning of that thing for one does not know meaning rather one understands meaning just as one does not understand reality but knows reality.¹⁷

When one knows something, he has bestowed on him, a sort of confidence which knowledge generates and confidence which can spur one to act as it is a reliable guide to action. Knowledge entails being sure, certain, so it has a higher valence, positive quality than belief. What is really important and fundamental to philosophy, more strikingly to epistemology is the question as regards the nature and intelligibility of reality. Knowledge has something to do with truth.

We may now ask, what is belief? Moser Paul K et al asserts the traditional view of propositional knowledge, originating in Plato’s Meno and Theaetetus acknowledges the view that knowledge is a justified true belief”.¹⁸ It then means that belief is just an aspect of knowledge, and that it works with justification to birth knowledge; though not overlooking truth. Belief does not constitute knowledge unless that belief is grounded, and supported with evidence, so a belief tantamount most often to opinion, for one can hold a belief without grounds to substantiate it. Belief is based on inner appreciation and appropriation, conviction and probably personal certainty, the truth is that a belief can eventually turn out false i.e. the belief that the earth was flat.

Reality

According to Hawkins Joyce ‘reality’ is the quality of being real, something real and not imaginary”. Procter Paul sees it as the quality or state of being real; real; (in reality) in actual fact; in spite of what was thought.¹⁹ Peter Angels holds that it is “everything that exists”.²⁰ It is in the most liberal form or sense everything that is, the totality of all things whether observable or not, accessible or understandable by science.... Reality is what a world view ultimately attempts to describe. There are two different aspects of reality namely the nature of reality itself and the relationship between mind and reality.²¹

Initial attempts to define reality that were recorded came from the Ionian thinkers, their responses and answers were cosmo-centred, as they were concerned with discovering the 'urstuff' of the universe. And then posited physical things and the basic constituent of reality: earth, air, water and fire. A drastic move occurred when the interrogation changed gear and switched over to ontology. Ontology does not seek to discover the based stuff of the universe, but queries what it means for something to be, whether reality consists one principle or many? It seeks to know the difference between reality and appearance. Philosophers have questioned the constitution of reality and sees it as a basic metaphysical question, and questioned if something can exist outside of the mind?

The first ontologist recorded in western philosophy was Parmenides, who said that being is and non-being is non-being. From him, we note that reality is one, and change is an illusion. It is a contradiction in logic, to hold that what is, is no longer that, it is now non-being. This understanding holds sway in Eastern Literatures (Indian and Chinese). Substance remains the same despite apparent transformations. The question that raises its head is, is reality spiritual or physical (material)?

Subsequently, thinkers and philosophers tend to see reality as substance from Aristotle to Descartes, this met a wall and entered into crisis in empiricism which idolizes sense knowledge. At this point the concept attracted attention starting with David Hume, the archempiricist who talked of constant co-relation and later developed in the 19th century by natural sciences especially biology i.e. Darwin’s evolutionary theory. Darwin’s theory differed so much from Aristotle’s who was concerned with building typologies. Minimah writes with evolutionary theory, the focus shifts from the definition of properties to the analysis of stages of development, whose significance can be grasped only through their reciprocal relations. Development is the key concept in evolutionary theory.²² This means that reality is not viewed as a set of fixed substances but as a process of changes.... He adds: The idea of reality as development/ evolution introduces also the notion of a series: a sequence of changes/stages of a series of elements all structurally linked with each other in an inseparable way. What characterizes a series is that each element in it acquires its meaning, its properties, its functions only through its relations with the rest. By the 19th century the idea that reality is of a relational nature that is made of mutually dependent elements/ structures and not of fixed things/entities pervades

every field i.e. in linguistics, it led to the development of phonetics... history it moves from tale of Greeks events to analysis of historical process, in philosophy the concept of reality as relational gave rise to process philosophy.²³ Reality is indeed an organic process that creativity and continuously evolve transforming itself.

For Aristotle, independent existence marks out reality while for process philosophers interconnectedness is the character of reality can we say that what should be known determines in a way our conceptualization of reality? Harold H. Titus et al assert there is a necessary relation between metaphysics and epistemology. Our conception of reality depends upon our understanding of what can be known. Conversely, our theory of knowledge depends upon understanding of ourselves in relation to the whole of reality.²⁴ Epistemology tries to differ see how knowledge differs from mere opinion or belief Ogugua maintains that reality philosophically speaking means existence, that which is, the very thing that manifest itself, what there is, excluding possible, fictitious things.²⁵

There is relationship among the trio universes of reality, knowledge and consciousness; when consciousness acts on reality knowledge is generated or birthed.

It is our duty to strive to adjust our beliefs to the way things are in reality our beliefs need to be substantiated. According to H.A Pritchard

Knowledge unconditionally presupposed that the reality to be known exist independently of the knowledge of it and that we know it as it exists in this independence if there is to be knowledge, there must be something to be known in other words, knowledge is essentially discovery or the finding of what already is.²⁶

Linda buttresses thus: knowledge is “a highly valued state in which a person is in cognitive contact with reality. It is therefore a relation. On one side of it is a conscious subject and on the other side is a portion of reality to which the knower is directly or indirectly related”.²⁷

Every claim, requires an evidential back up. Metaphysics and Epistemology are sides of the same coin the coin, of philosophy Bahm states, since experience exists, all that exists in experience is..... subject for metaphysical inquiry, since the only existence that a metaphysician know is existence as experienced, all existence that is experienced is also a subject for epistemological inquiry.²⁸

Belief, Doubt and Knowledge

The truth is that there is a difference between belief and doubt. “Belief” does not make us act at once but puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in a certain way, when the occasion arises... our beliefs guide our desires and shape our actions.²⁹ Once strong doubts are expressed about an opinion or belief it ceases to become a belief.

Even though at time belief and knowledge are used by many as if they are synonymous, they are not the same. Godwin Sogolo supports this view thus: The traditional African is therefore, claiming to know and to believe the same thing at the same time. But this is not in accord with the epistemological doctrine which claims that we cannot know and believe the same thing at the same time.³⁰

Pritchard knows that both belief and knowledge differ and asserts knowing and believing differ kindness. To know is not to have a belief of a special kind differing from beliefs and no increase in the feeling of conviction which it implies with current it into knowledge.³¹ Irrespective of this clear distinction, he still maintains that believing presupposes knowing. Truth and falsity cannot be used to distinguish belief and knowledge, they apply to belief and not to knowledge. He emphasizes. When we know something we know that our condition is one of knowing that thing, while when we believe something we know that our condition is one of believing and not of knowing; so we cannot mistake belief for knowledge or vice versa.³²

Does it mean we cannot improve a belief to become knowledge? Does it mean no belief will ever turn out true? How does it presuppose knowledge? It does seem it has to do with level of conviction at points in time i.e. helio-centricism and geocentricism.

The considerations supporting our beliefs may in turn support our knowledge claims. Can one disbelieve what he is convinced or knows to be true?

Prince remarks, believing means

1. Entertaining P together with one or more alternative propositions q and r.
2. Knowing a fact for set of facts F, which is relevant to P,q and r
3. Knowing that F makes P more likely than of q or r i.e. having more evidence for P than q or r
4. Asserting to P; which in turn includes:
 - (a) The preference of P to q and r
 - (b) The feeling of a certain degree of confidence with regard to p.³³

Sogolo remarks: It is true that we do regard certain conditions as those of knowing and others as those of believing but we are never sure of the correctness of our classification. If we were, the question of degree of conviction and the doubt we entertain as to whether we truly believe what we claim to believe or whether we truly know what we claim to know, would not arise.³⁴

We may ask, do we have independent standard or criteria of truth applicable in every culture/ people? Standards may not be comparable, as the relativistic spread show that what is false or true is culture dependent many a time. What is real or unreal depends on paradigms, and probably inquisitic convention of the culture in which concepts are used, language has a peculiar it disserts reality. As Iloanya and Nwanegbo-Ben noted that it is a truism of the saying by Igbo people of Nigeria, that apprenticeship (*igbabo*) is an empirical source of knowledge that dignifies the Igbo human person.³⁵

However, Steven Lukes agrees that some criteria for evaluating the truth of belief claims are context- dependent, even as some are universal.³⁶ That does not mean that some beliefs don't violate the laws of logic and are seen as mysterious i.e. Nuer people holding that 'twins are birds', what criterion or criteria will we use to evaluate this? This statement relates to reality in another sense (alternative realities). The criteria to be used are in principle neither directly verifiable nor directly falsifiable by empirical means.³⁷

The belief business is not always harmless, at times it can be very dangerous and destructive. We need to move on in life with greater awareness, and question reality as much as we can, as there is possibility of some of our beliefs being mistaken and false, we don't need to take beliefs for granted or think or without questioning.³⁸

We should interrogate realities carefully. It is not the best to just flow with the wind, trend. We just surrender ourselves to the proposition in a childlike and effortless way. Accordingly, we are unaware of the fact that the proposition may after all not be true. And if it turns out false, we feel a particularly disconcerting and painful shock, quite different from the mild surprise and disappointment which results from the unmasking of an ordinary false belief. It is like the shock of being suddenly waked from a dream.³⁹

Thinking without questioning, Price calls acceptance and can be seen as a genre of belief, quite different from belief proper. Acceptance can be seen as unreasoned absence of dissent, while belief becomes a reasoned assent to an entertained proposition. "There is deciding to act as if P was true, there is the merely acting as if P was true from habit or possibly from instinct".⁴⁰

When we act from instinct, norms, habit or tradition, evidence and justification play little or no role. Price insists
Thus it is not true that in acceptance or taking for granted we have no evidence for what we accept; though we could have it, if we aroused ourselves first our unquestioning state of mind and consider critically what we are already conscious of.⁴¹

It is what we assimilated in our societies from customs and traditions that Price termed acceptance, we accepted them without interrogation, those are beliefs in traditional cultures. We usually reinforce these via our individual experiences, conjecturing of some reasons why it should be so, these may not be satisfactory explanations. Many times beliefs are justified by usage.

In traditional and modern culture, science oriented societies the belief that one can be hurt through his effigy or any article he is using or has used, or even through his faeces, urine or the sand he matched on, the feeling of accepting such, for it will be reinforced by such one's psychological reactions or response to his experience. To look for as weakness or deficiency is to exhibit lack of understanding man's constitution and how man is wired. Justification and evidences to support belief are most often difficult to determine.

We can justify knowledge via its sources which are external perception, self-memory, self-awareness (reflection), reason.⁴² We can even include revelation and intuition. Belief's sources are usually custom and tradition.

In our culture, the human nature, people believe not only what is foolish, but even that which is unintelligible and even absurd. Since people from different cultures meet interact and discuss, the need for a sort of standards arises, so the temptation to abandon every effort, drive to look for a criterion or criteria to see the truth of some beliefs need not be too strong.

In order to really enter into an embrace with the other, we need to invoke the principle of charity even though it has a normative cloak, and character need to be reported, life is larger than logic, so the weakness of its intellectual merit should not be overblown.

Sogolo remarks, it is for this reason that in recent times some thinkers have appealed to the so-called principle of charity. What this means is that in judging the truth-status of beliefs outside one's culture, one should be maximally charitable. He adds: We would want to understand the truth of claims in cultures other than ours but many would insist that we can only be charitable on the truth of belief - claims when an initial foundation for confidence and trust has been built.⁴³

SIGNIFICANCE OF KNOWLEDGE

Stretching further, the issue of knowledge Eboh pointed out the existential significance of human knowledge and examined the cosmic structure of man, the evaluation of consciousness and the relevance of thought in human existence. Igbo people view knowledge as wealth according to Iloanya and Nwanegbo-Ben, therefore, a man with vast knowledge of culture, ethos, rituals and rites is believed to be a man of the people, respected fellow, a village library that enjoys respect and dignity in his community.⁴⁴

Man is in the world, of the world, from the world, is the world. This is a profound truth of our human existence.⁴⁵ Tielhard de Chardin, asserts that man is a part of life. He is even the most characteristic, most polar and most living part of life.⁴⁶ By implication, man shares with the universe, even in constitution for he participates in the ups and downs of the universe, in the laws of the universe. Eboh states;

The point of interest is that man as part of cosmos is a "thing" among things, a homogeneous part of all, a moment of individuation of the infinite space - time. Inserted into the highest cosmic scale, man shares with other living unity the laws of life. He is an "object" among objects, He is entirely inside the unitary "plot" of cosmic texture.⁴⁷

In short, man is in communion with the universe, cosmos and nature; and he has continued so to do by the use of knowledge. It is via experience and reason that man knows that there is being, becoming and death, that he is on a continuous move or march unto death and nothing will stop him from existing at the nick of time, the appointed time which is different for each person.

It is important as we praise the significance of knowledge to as well acknowledge the significance of ignorance. It is obvious that ignorance may foster curiosity, result in novel discoveries, or emphasise knowledge gaps that require resolution. Let us consider scientists who are engaged in the development of a cure for a disease. They are initially unaware of the precise solution. Nevertheless, this ignorance inspires them to enquire, experiment, and investigate a variety of potential outcomes. The absence of this initial ignorance would render research, inquiry, and the desire to pursue answers unnecessary. In this regard, ignorance becomes significant and it is epistemically valuable due to its critical function in the acquisition of knowledge.⁴⁸

Man is more and more resourceful due to this consciousness, for the mind is the greatest gift nature bestowed on man, man uses his intelligence to overcome obstacles in life as he is self - conscious, exhibits self - awareness. Man is a mini - world; his presence on earth recorded a qualitative leap or jump among forces in nature. Eboh states we can in fact, say that man is the presence of the world to itself because in spite of the immensity, power, and the mystery of the universe, it would remain in a metaphysical coma if there were no man to give it a name, man is, in a way, the "word" through which the world speaks. The world, as it were, is helpless without man, it cannot speak to itself; it can't know itself.⁴⁹ Man, is that being in whom consciousness exploded. Tielhard asserts once life, a long this particular ray, reached a critical point of arrangement it became hypercentred upon itself to the point of becoming capable of foresight and invention. It became conscious" in the second degree". And this way sufficient to enable it in a few hundreds of thousands of years to transform the surface and appearance of the earth.⁵⁰

This man is a thinking being 'res cogitans' for Descartes, it is due to this attribute that he is able to know and even generate knowledge. According to Rene Descartes, man is a conscious being (res cogitans) a being that doubts, understands, asserts, denies, is willing, is unwilling; further that has sense and imagination.⁵¹ Man is made to search for knowledge, and even prolong its search, making this search limitless. According to Viglino, the absence of knowledge is the absence of human reality and definitive suspension of knowledge is absolute absence of man.⁵²

It is through knowledge that one can really answer man, via it he can attain self-actualization., it can as well lead man to auto - destruction evidenced by what we see today in human society.

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