

Lesson 4. Knowledge, beliefs, and second-hand knowledge.

Key ideas:

- (1) We must distinguish between belief and knowledge, between what we can know for sure (or to do the research or to get the education or to have the experience to have such knowledge) and beliefs that may or may not be convertible into knowledge.
- (2) Because we do not and cannot have knowledge about everything, we often rely on second-hand knowledge that we acquire from others to help us navigate through life, possibly originating in advice from parents about what sources to use to solve a problem.
- (3) This second-hand knowledge is derived from cognitive authorities. This “knowledge” really exists as belief in consumer’s minds with varying degrees of certainty based on the degree to which they trust and believe their cognitive authorities. This knowledge as a source grows as the result of this second-hand knowledge is confirmed as trustworthy. It converts from pure belief to some assurance about the belief.
- (4) Persons, news institutions, or social media can act as cognitive authorities, whether genuine or false.
- (5) These authorities can be genuine or false, the paradox being that one can have high certainty about their cognitive authorities and yet it may be misplaced.
- (6) These beliefs (to us as we hear or see them, though not to the cognitive authority) can be true, false, or a matter of taste: true, if one can do or does the research to verify it; false, if after research, it cannot be established as true; or a matter of taste, if based on one’s tastes or preferences, being neither true or false.
- (7) Consumers of information sources may tend to assume that their beliefs are knowledge when they are at best second-hand knowledge or at worst false belief(s).

We need to consider the distinction between knowledge and beliefs. While Plato and some of his commentators did not find his definition of knowledge to be entirely satisfactory, it is a good start. Plato characterized knowledge as “justified true belief” (*Theaetetus*, 201 c-d), i.e., one can supply a rationale for what one knows, based on reason and evidence or facts. Wikipedia offers a relatively straightforward approach: “Knowledge is a familiarity, awareness, or understanding of someone or something, such as [facts](#), [information](#), [descriptions](#), or [skills](#), which is acquired through [experience](#) or [education](#) by [perceiving](#), [discovering](#), or [learning](#)” (Knowledge, 2019). It is a cognitive state by which we understand something as the result of our experience, education, research, or cognitive processing. There is overwhelming knowledge in books, such as scientific knowledge, but this knowledge is latent to us until we each do the work of converting and processing the signs, symbols, and meaning of the texts and acquiring the appropriate experiences into knowledge. Knowledge has a quality of certitude, perhaps not immediately, but after a deliberative process.

The author argues that beliefs come in three general types: (1) true beliefs; (2) beliefs that are preferences, being neither true or false; and (3) false beliefs. The author argues for these distinctions because when one hears various kinds of information from, for example, one’s preferred news sources, what is the cognitive status of this information? The kinds of information that one hears or reads do

not exist as knowledge in most news consumers, save for those who have amassed a certain level of knowledge on a particular matter. There are exceptions as to when such information is simply received as confirmation bias and there are occasions where one feels warranted to accept second-hand knowledge without needing to establish its actual truth. When information is received from an information source, it is belief or what can be called second-hand knowledge (see below). "True belief" is belief that could be turned into knowledge through experience, education or research, such as seeking evidence from reliable sources. If one did not know that the hypotenuse of a right triangle is the square root of the sum of its sides squared, one could take a course in geometry to learn it. If one believes that Pizzagate is a fake news story, one can do the research using reliable sources for confirming that assessment. If I think that Adele is a better singer than Lady Gaga, that may be true for one person and not another. Matters of taste, for which one can make arguments, are never true per se. They are matters of belief that will vary among individuals or groups, even though one can advance arguments for why one would prefer one over the other. There are "false beliefs," e.g., climate change denial, which cannot be converted into truth. Thus the author wants to distinguish among beliefs that can be true, false, or a matter of taste: true, if one does or can do the research to verify it or has the experience or education; false, if after research, it cannot be established as true; or as a matter of preference; a matter of taste, if based on one's preferences. For example, at a July 2019 re-election rally, Trump made the following claims: that there was not an empty seat at this event or other Trump events; that Ilhan Omar praised al Qaeda and terrorism; that patients with preexisting conditions were protected more by Republicans than Democrats; that Hispanics have low employment because they want a strong border wall; that in the Ninth Congressional District, the liberal Dan McCready wants to take away Americans' guns, wants to raise taxes, and likes socialism and open borders (Dale & Subramaniam, 2019). These are false beliefs, despite his supporters' embrace of or indifference to them (for example, many of Trump's supporters do not care if he utters lies), and yet they are touted as knowledge and often received or believed as knowledge. A somewhat confusing scenario needs to be sorted out: consumers receive information that pretends to be knowledge and that may be claimed to be knowledge by the consumer, based on their belief in a cognitive authority (such as a political leader) and yet which is at best in the consumer's mind second-hand knowledge that may be in actuality belief and even false belief. Depending on the context, it could be true belief as well, but it only becomes converted into knowledge based on education, experience or research. In settings like political rallies or cable news programs, the information provided is often a conflation of all three types. The point is that we have to sort out what cognitive states or claims someone contends to have versus what they actually are, despite the certainty with which they hold them.

Interestingly, Plato also proposed a category of "imagining," (*Republic*, 510a) a cognitive state inferior to the category of belief (or in my extrapolation, false belief). This cognitive state involves taking on a distorted perception of the sensible world. Conspiracy theorists often have such distorted perceptions: e.g., QAnon theorists assert such beliefs that John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Jr. is alive and well and working with Trump (Dickson, 2019). False beliefs are false perceptions of the world (e.g., that Trump's rallies are always full or overcrowded) whereas false imaginings build on constructed frameworks that have no corollary in experience, e.g., that there are bodies of aliens that the government has secured from Roswell, NM and are hidden from the public. Such conspiracy theories, whether from the right or the left, are so pervasive and entertained, we might think of adding another category to the taxonomy of false information in lesson 2, "imagined realities," which are fanciful interpretations of real or fictional events, deemed to be true, just as the prisoners in Plato's *Republic*, who are chained from birth in a cave

where they can only see images of objects parading before them, believe that their experience is the only reality (*Republic*, 514a–520a).

Patrick Wilson explored the construction of knowledge in *Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority* (1983). He argues that we can construct knowledge in one of two ways: (1) based on our experience; and (2) from or through others. Since our experience is limited, we must rely at times on second-hand knowledge, something that we do not know for sure but take at the word of others. These others may exist on a spectrum from very knowledgeable to outright liars. Cognitive authority is a phrase that Wilson coined to explain our understanding of others as being authorities. Cognitive authorities must have both credibility and trustworthiness. The second-hand knowledge that one gets from them really exists as belief in consumer's minds with varying degrees of certainty based on the degree to which they trust and believe their cognitive authorities. This knowledge as a source grows as the result of this second-hand knowledge is confirmed as trustworthy. It converts from pure belief to some assurance about the belief. We will explore how cognitive authority occurs both for real news and fake news, and how second-hand knowledge can be confused or embraced as first-hand knowledge or, more correctly, unwarranted or false belief.

We need cognitive authorities. If we had to prove everything that we know, we would be paralyzed from making any progress in our lives. It seems probable that Trump's followers see Trump himself and Fox News and other ultra-right figures and associations as cognitive authorities. Similarly, liberals may embrace MSNBC and *The Washington Post* as their cognitive authorities. Are these cognitive authorities genuine? Do they have the properties and characteristics that we associate with real cognitive authorities? Or are they something that we might call pseudo-cognitive authorities or false cognitive authorities? If so, how do we distinguish among these cognitive authorities? This issue will be explored further in Lesson 6.

Exercise suggestions will call on participants to consider the following questions:

- (1) In your experience, what do you count as genuine knowledge?
- (2) Can you think of any beliefs that you have that could be turned into knowledge? How? For example, if you believe that Pizzagate is a fake news story, you can do the research using reliable sources to show this is a case of fake news. Consider some other fake news stories or memes.
- (3) Can you think of false beliefs that you held and may remember? How did you go about determining that they were false and not a matter of belief or preference?
- (4) Name some of your personal authorities. On which subjects do you trust each of them? How do you justify your trust in them? Were they always reliable?
- (5) Who or what are your cognitive authorities in media (e.g., newspapers, television or cable channel, or social media site)? Do they exhibit a bias? Do you think that you use them to bolster your view (as confirmation bias)?
- (6) Who or what are examples of false cognitive authorities? On what grounds can you assert that they are false?