

Knowledge, Beliefs, Opinions and Second-hand Knowledge



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Outline

2

- Knowledge and Second-hand Knowledge
- True and False Beliefs, Opinions, Delusions
- Delusions or Imagining: A State Below Belief?
 - Plato and the Allegory of the Cave
 - Extrapolations
- Does certain media produce false beliefs or delusions as second-hand knowledge?

Introduction

3

- In a previous lecture we noted that the psychological foundation of gullibility “appears to be the universal human capacity for trust – to accept second-hand information we receive from others as a proxy for reality.”
- This is not surprising because after we are born, we learn about the world. There are two ways in which we learn:
 - (1) We can construct first-hand knowledge based on our experience. Unfortunately, our experience is limited.
 - (2) We can construct knowledge from or through others, second-hand knowledge, something that we do not know for sure but take at the word of others
 - Because we cannot experience everything, a large portion of the information that receive is in our life from others (parents, siblings, friends, classmates, etc.). We can call this second-hand knowledge. (Wilson, 1983).
 - We tend to naturally trust these people for the information that they provide at the beginning of our life. The people who supply us with second-hand knowledge become what Patrick Wilson calls our cognitive authorities.
 - When we are young, our cognitive authorities tend to be few (parents, religious leaders),
 - As we mature, we tend to acquire many different cognitive authorities related to our various experiences, interests or work. They become our cognitive authorities because of their presumed credibility, reliability and trustworthiness. This may not always be the case depending on the nature of the presumed authority. We will return to this issue in the next lecture.

Introduction

4

- What complicates matters is that we are not only given a set of experiences or second-hand knowledge, but we are given a set of interpretations. If we are born into a Jewish family, our events and perceptions, even that to which we pay attention or ignore, are framed by that context. Other authorities (e.g., teachers, media, idols) also layer their interpretations for understanding our world, what is going on in it and to what to pay attention.
- It is only later in life, if or as we mature, that we set ourselves to examine these interpretations, and we shuck those that we no longer believe, or don't serve us in some way, while retaining others or modifying them. Some persons never leave the primary interpretations: religious fundamentalists, science fundamentalists, political fundamentalists, etc., who spend an inordinate amount of effort (and mental gymnastics) justifying their belief.
- Even our primary experiences are interpreted. If a Canadian says to me that it is 23 degrees outside while I am visiting Canada, I may not be sure how cold or warm it is, because my interpretive framework is Fahrenheit. If they said it was 73.4 degrees (F), I would easily know.
- The problem is that we loosely call these states knowledge. But are they really? There is a cognitive state of the creators of the information messages and there is the cognitive state on the part of the receivers.

Knowledge, Belief and Second-Hand Knowledge

5

- Two questions that are of interest
 - What is the cognitive state of the actors, creators or senders of information in our world?
 - What is the cognitive state of the receivers or interpreters of such information?
- Is it knowledge, belief (true belief, false belief, and beliefs that are neither true or false)? Or is something lower than false belief?
- How do they differ among senders and receivers?

Simplified Communication Model

6

| Sender-Agent | Message | Receiver-Interpreter |
|---|--|--|
| Sender-Agent (e.g., parent, teacher) | Form of message: speech, text, example | Receiver-Interpreter (Individual, Audience, Viewer) |
| Authority (e.g., one's tradition, religious authority, science, historical knowledge) | Content: what is trying to be conveyed | Authority |
| | | Interpreted Message |
| Cognitive State: Knowledge, True Belief, False Belief, Opinion, Delusion | | Resulting Cognitive State: Knowledge, True Belief, False Belief, Opinion, Delusion |

Knowledge, Belief and Second-Hand Knowledge

- There seems to be a variety of things that characterize a person's cognitive state (1) true beliefs; (2) false beliefs; (3) opinions or preferences, being neither true or false; and (we seem to have to add) (4) delusions or imaginings (e.g., conspiracy theories).
- "True belief" is a belief that could be turned into knowledge (or which can be justified) 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 opinions or preferential beliefs 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. Some false beliefs are often tried to be portrayed as truth through appeals to false or selective experts, faulty data collection or manipulation, or false evidence.
- There is a fourth category that is hard to name: Delusions, imaginings. It is the stuff of conspiracy theories, junk science and unhinged assertions for which there is no way to supply legitimate evidence or are self-inconsistent or illogical. E.g., Trump is still president.

Second-hand Knowledge

8

- Second-hand Knowledge is:
- information derived from one's cognitive authorities (such as a friend, colleague or newspaper)
- to help one's interaction with different domains in the world, whether assessments of the best books of the year or decisions about political issues or how to grow as an employee in an organization.
- It is not really knowledge per se in the mind of the receivers, but *beliefs* based on the credibility, trustworthiness, expertise or reliability of those authorities have or are purported to have.
- Such beliefs can be true or false or a preference or a delusion based on the quality and nature of the "knowledge" that one receives from their cognitive authority.

Imagining?

9

- Is there a state below false beliefs, a state that we might want to call imagining? Surprisingly, Plato may help us understand this state (and the cognitive state of QAnon adherents). Some of you may remember a philosophy class in which Plato's Metaphor of the Line (Plato, *Republic*, 509d–511e) and Allegory of the Cave (Plato, *Republic*, 514a–520a) were discussed.
- I'll show you the line to indicate where imaging takes place, which is explicated through the Allegory of the Cave.

**Plato's Analogy of The Divided Line
The Four Stages of Cognition**

| Source of Perception | Things Perceived | Modes of Perception | Classes of Perception |
|--|--|--|-------------------------|
| <p>THE GOOD <i>Author and governor of the intelligible order, of the world of reality</i></p> | <p><i>Forms</i> (Reality, justice, beauty, truth, equality)</p> | <p><i>Reason</i> (Dialectic)</p> | <p>KNOWLEDGE</p> |
| | <p><i>Mathematical Objects</i> (Hypotheses)</p> | <p><i>Understanding</i> (As in mathematical thought)</p> | |
| <p>THE SUN <i>Author and governor of the visible order, of the world of appearances</i></p> | <p><i>Physical Objects</i> (All objects perceptible by the senses)</p> | <p><i>Belief</i> (Accepting sensory perceptions as givens)</p> | <p>OPINION</p> |
| | <p><i>Images of Physical Objects</i> (Shadows, reflections, illusions)</p> | <p><i>Imagination</i> (Supposition)</p> | |

Beliefs, Opinions and Imaginings

11

Opinion (*doxa*) – the lower part of the line.

- According to Plato, some kinds of opinions could be converted into genuine information or knowledge, for example, one may believe that the area of a circle is equal to πr^2 (pi times the radius squared) and then prove it (at which point it becomes knowledge).
- Some opinion cannot be so converted: e.g. a belief in the “best movie of the past year” or the “best political viewpoint.”
- As information specialists we try to promote opinions (δόξα - *doxa*) as information – and within these, we hope at least to provide “right opinion” or the orthodoxy (ὀρθοδοξία, *orthodoxia* – “right opinion”) that we hope will lead to some version of truth(s). The orthodoxy, to resurrect a not-so-common word, is the “knowledge” of a subject according to the prevailing paradigm of that subject.

Imagining

- Distorted perception of the sensible world, described in the Allegory of the Cave (Plato, *Republic*, 514a–520a).

Observations

12

- As librarians and information professionals, we are, unless we have subject expertise, “authorities about authorities.”
- The latter authorities are those in charge of the orthodoxy of a field – the dominant set of beliefs and understandings that set the structure of a field: e.g. the chemistry professionals’ prevailing understanding of chemistry that might be found in a current textbook.
- In reference work, we consult an “authority” and provide the prevailing “right” opinion to the information seeker. In fact, the whole edifice of knowledge and its expression in books and media are built on trust – trust that the experts are reporting and establishing what they believe to be true about a subject matter. Knowledge is collective, not individual (though an individual has to some to understand it by themselves individually). So when individuals declare their individual right to reject a vaccination for COVID-19, they know little about science and how the science community works, especially when it makes mistakes and invents a process to correct those mistakes.
- E.g., we now believe that the universe is expanding from an original “big bang” and earth is the 3rd planet in a 8-planet solar system that is on the edge of the Milky Way galaxy, which is part of the local cluster of galaxies, which is a component of the Virgo Supercluster, which is itself a component of the Laniakea Supercluster (‘laniakea’ is Hawaiian for “immeasurable heaven.”). See the awesome video at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/video/laniakea-our-home-supercluster/>.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

13

- Socrates describes a situation that takes place in a dark cave.
- A number of prisoners have lived in this deep cave since birth, never seeing the light of day, and are physically constrained in such a way that they cannot look to either side or behind them.
- Behind them is a fire, and behind the fire is a low wall, from behind which various objects are lifted into the air manipulated by another group of people, who are out of sight behind the wall. The fire casts shadows of the objects across the wall facing the prisoners.
- The prisoners watch the sequences that the shadows play out and play games predicting the sequences and sounds that reverberate in the cave. When they refer to one of the shadows as a "book" for example, they are not actually seeing a book, but rather the shadow of a book, confusing its shadowy appearance with actual reality.
- Because of their condition and constraints, they believe their perceptions are the most real things in the world.
- They are so convinced of the reality of their context, they mock anyone who would assert otherwise.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

14

- As the allegory continues to be extrapolated, the prisoners are forced to come to see their actual condition, first by being shocked into an awareness of their condition, by becoming aware of the real source of the light (the fire and then the sun), seeing how things are as they are forced to move out of the cave; and second as a mid-wife, letting them, through an interrogation, to come to understand for themselves, in a form of self-realization, their actual condition.
- In the Platonic/Socratic view of true education, there are two aspects of the Socratic method of education:
 1. Socrates as a stingray, electric eel or gadfly (to which he is referred in various Platonic writings), shocking or benumbing his interlocutors into an awareness of their ignorance as they are temporarily blinded by the light. The purpose of this shock is to clear away what one unidentified commentator referred to as "the conceit of false knowledge." It is a brilliant succinct description of the intent of the first aspect of the Socratic method.
 2. Socrates as a midwife – using questions skillfully to have his interlocutors come to a self-realization of their true condition.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

15

- This conversion process does not always succeed as many are secure in their state of ignorance; or they lack the wit to follow the logical conclusion of Socrates' questions.
- The Socratic method is prefaced, if you recall many of Plato's dialogs, with a profession of ignorance. His interlocutor in a dialog, e.g., Meno in the *Meno*, brings up a topic to be discussed, such as virtue. Socrates' response is an enthusiastic willingness to learn, because he professes that he has little or no knowledge of the topic at hand.
- His profession of ignorance has been referred to as ironic, because in the end, his knowledge of the topic, as 'limited' as it is professed to be, turns out to be the most informed.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

16

- What is fascinating is the condition out of which education takes place from a Socratic perspective: the rise of "imaginings" (in Plato) or ignorance.
- This condition can help us understand contemporary world politics, especially political polarization and fringe political stances.
- In later lectures we will return to the role of Plato in combating fake news.
- I make the case in future lectures, that not only are many supporters of Trump and the Republican party are likened to Plato's Cave Dwellers but also that they are happy with their condition and do not want to leave. And they mock those who believe otherwise, claiming that the outsiders believe in fake news. They scream at them because they alone are the possessors of truth. The irony is that their reality is fake, and what is fake to them is reality. The question is how and why.

Knowledge, Belief and Second-Hand Knowledge

- During the current coronavirus pandemic, the right and alt-right made claims about it that are demonstrably false: that masks don't work, that vaccinations create hidden damage, that bleach, ivermectin, hydroxychloroquine and now Flonase now all prevent or cure the coronavirus
- All of these claims are verifiably false (by citing scientific evidence, or showing audiovisual recordings about these claims), but that does not seem to deter many alt-right media viewers or QAnon followers or other conspiracy theorists to ignore or rationalize their dismissal of scientific evidence and furthermore to mock it.
- A somewhat confusing scenario needs to be sorted out: consumers receive information that pretends to be knowledge, even if second-hand knowledge, and that may be believed to be knowledge by the consumer, based on their belief in a cognitive authority (such as a political leader, religious leader or news organization) and yet which is at best in the consumer's mind second-hand knowledge that may be in actuality belief and even false belief, or in line with the previous lectures a matter of imagining
- In the previous lesson, we saw psychological factors at work: information avoidance, gullibility, cognitive biases, exaggerated fears and misinterpretations of events, resentment, anger, etc. that facilitate the misunderstanding of what is really going on: second-hand knowledge based in false belief or imagining (delusions) most often to serve a political agenda (alt-right) or to make money (click-bait entrepreneurs).
- The problem is that the senders or creators know full well that what they are posting or saying is false or delusional and expect those who pay attention to them or for whom they are their authority to accept it as knowledge: vaccination mandates are destroying one's individual liberty (not mention of responsibility to public health).