WHAT DO *THEY* KNOW?

Jonny Blamey

Can you know something that isn't true?

'Philosophy' means the love of knowledge, and philosophers, being jealous lovers, have often wondered what exactly they know. The question is typically directed inward. Which of my beliefs can I really be said to *know*? To answer this question we need a standard by which we can sort our beliefs into those that we know and those that we merely believe. This standard will be a standard of justification, or sufficient reason. When sorting the wheat from the chaff, the philosopher can do an inventory of his beliefs and ask himself, 'Are my reasons for this belief good enough? Am I fully justified in this opinion?' If the answers to these questions are yes, then the belief or opinion is knowledge.

Like all lovers, the greatest philosophers have found that nothing is good enough for their beloved. No justification or reason is strong enough, reliable enough, deep enough to be a fitting ground for their beloved to stand upon. Socrates claimed paradoxically that the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing. Descartes under went a process of methodological doubt and concluded that, prior to proving the existence of God, he did not even know that there was an external world at all.

These philosophers were interested in what they themselves know, but in the real world of love, war and the economy it is often what other people know that is most interesting. After all, in most cases, philosophy aside, we know what we know. What we want to know is what *they* know. Often we can make judgements as to what other people do and do not know without access to their reasons or justifications. I will give three examples:

Love

I get down on one knee and am about to ask my beloved to marry me. She says no before I even open my mouth. I can tell

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straight away that in spite of my best efforts to keep it secret, she knew I was going to propose. At this moment I know that she knew without any access to her reasons or justifications. It is only later that I discover that she was friends with the girl in the jeweller, the one I blabbed my plans to.

War

Armed to the teeth we sneak into the enemy fort under the cover of darkness. We find the fort deserted. Suddenly, flood lights are turned on and the enemy shoots us to pieces from the outer walls. It was a trap! They knew we were coming. If we live through this, we might be able to find out how they knew. But we don't live through it, and in the moment of our death, all we know is that they knew we were coming.

The Economy

We decide to gain control of a company by buying up 20% of the shares to bring our share up to 51%. When we put this decision into action the following day we find that the shares have gone up in price over night and the takeover will cost a million more than we anticipated. Further enquiry shows that one investor bought up all the shares. This investor has made a million pounds at our expense. It is clear to us that he knew about our takeover plans. How he found out is a subject of serious enquiry. But it is clear enough that he did know.

In general, the question of whether someone knows a fact can be answered without reference to their reasons or justification, although we can assume they found out *somehow*.

The past, the future, and free will

Another interesting feature of knowledge is its interference with our sense of freedom. If we know in advance that something is going to happen, then it seems beyond our control. This has an obvious relationship with time. It is clear that we can't control things that have already happened, but that we can have an effect on things in the future. This leads to two incompatible thoughts that people often have in philosophy.

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Firstly: that we can never really know anything of the future. Secondly: that we are not really free in any of our actions since the future is predetermined.

Both these thoughts are clearly wrong, since there is plenty in the future that we know, and there can be no doubt that we choose at least some of our actions freely. I believe that these two crazy thoughts come from the idea that knowledge is, to use a technical term, *factive.* This means that a belief is only knowledge if it is true. If a fact is true, then I can't choose to make it false. So I can never have any choice over the things I know to be the case. This means that if the future is knowable, it is not free, and if it is free, it is not knowable. But the future is both knowable and free, so there must be something wrong with this factivity condition.

Imagine I am invited to Marion's house and she offers me a choice of tea or coffee. There are two possible future facts: i) I choose tea; ii) I choose coffee. It just so happens that I am a tea lover, and I only drink coffee when there is no choice. Consequently I choose tea. Marion knows that I strongly prefer tea and therefore knew I would choose tea. So she brewed the tea in advance of me making my choice. There is no real problem here: I freely chose tea, and she knew that I would. The problem comes from the factivity demand of knowledge. While she was making tea, she knew I would choose tea. Knowledge is factive so this entails that it was then true that I would choose tea. This means that when she offered me the choice, I could *only* choose tea, becaue it is *already false* that I would choose coffee. So *really and truly* I had no choice. But if I did *really* have a choice, then she can't have known that I would choose tea. Through some kind of philosophical illusion it begins to seem that by predicting that I would choose tea, Marion is some how *compelling* me to choose tea. But she is doing nothing of the kind. I choose tea because I prefer tea, not because Marion knows that I prefer tea. If I had been a suitably spiteful libertine I could have demonstrated this by choosing coffee. This hypothetical demonstration could be thought to prove one of two things:

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1. Marion did not really know that I would choose tea, in which case we can never be said to really know anything of the future choices of free agents.
2. I could have chosen coffee in spite of the fact that she knew that I would choose tea, in which case knowledge is not necessarily factive.

In my opinion the second option is much more metaphysically appealing. The social sciences are advancing at an incredible pace and scientists are able to make increasingly accurate and varied predictions about peoples' behaviour. For example, it is medically proven that heroin is highly addictive. Heroin addicts will predictably go to great lengths to consume heroin. Given a choice between heroin and no heroin they will predictably choose heroin. Knowledge of this predictability can lead to a loss of autonomy in the drug addict. The addict might reason that since her choices are so predictable, they are not really choices at all and are therefore no longer her responsibility. This kind of thought process leads to a kind of fatalism and can have a negative impact on an addict's sense of autonomy and ability to break harmful behaviour patterns.

There are claims that over-eating can be genetically determined. For example, the Prader-Willi syndrome, first identified in the 1950s, is predictive of hyperphagia (the medical term for overeating) and therefore of obesity. More recently the syndrome is thought to be caused by loss of active genes in a specific region of the paternal chromosome 15. Does this mean that someone who discovers they have such a genetic make up has no control over how much they eat? It does not. Just because it is possible to predict that someone will eat all the pies, it doesn't mean that they are compelled to. It is possible to refrain from eating even when one is insatiably hungry. In general a prediction of a choice can be correct without constraining the chooser. A predictable choice is a choice none the less.

In love, war, and the economy we want to know what they know about what we are doing. As lovers of knowledge we

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should be interested in what this knowledge consists in. It could have been the case that our evolutionary past was filled with Marion's forebears trying to predict our desires the better to satisfy them. But sadly it is just as likely that our prehistoric lives were filled with enemies trying to outsmart us so they could rob us and kill us. It would churlish of me to choose coffee simply on the grounds that Marion knew I would choose tea. But if Marion was trying to poison me, this might be a sensible strategy. Demanding factivity constrains our thinking. We end up wanting to say that if we choose tea, then Marion knows that we will choose tea, whereas if we choose coffee, then Marion only thinks that we will choose tea. But the choice is before us, and her prediction has already been made. It seems absurd to suggest that her mental state depends on our choice, but it is equally absurd to suggest that our choice depends on her mental state. In a competitive situation the fact that an enemy knows you are going to make a certain choice can be in of itself a reason not to make that choice. Therefore it can be important to recognise a species of knowledge that is not necessarily true. It can be a matter of life and death. For this reason we must lay aside the policy of appeasing the traditional analysis of knowledge that focuses on truth and justification if we are to get at the true nature of what it is we love.

To bring this point home I ask you to imagine a life or death situation in World War II where a British General's plans are based on information about the what the German's know about the British General's plans. The Germans are occupying a French town and the British are going to attack at dawn, hoping to surprise the Germans. A British spy in the town finds out that the Germans know of the attack. Back at the British base the spy has this exchange with the British General:

SPY: The Germans know we are going to attack at dawn.
GENERAL : Then we will call off the attack.

Enter Philosopher.

PHILOSOPHER : Why are we calling off the attack?

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GENERAL: Because the Germans know we are going to attack.

PHILOSOPHER: But the Germans don't know we are going to attack.

SPY: Yes they do, I heard them discussing it.

PHILOSOPHER: No, I mean that the Germans don't know we are going to attack, because knowledge is factive, and we are calling off the attack. So it is not true that we are going to attack and therefore not true that the Germans know we are going to attack.

GENERAL: So the Germans don't know we are going to attack?

PHILOSOPHER: That's right, they don't.

GENERAL: Then there is no reason to call off the attack.

SPY (*Peeved*): Look, if factivity is so important, I'll rephrase it. The Germans know that we *intend* to attack at dawn.

GENERAL: Then we will call off the attack.

PHILOSOPHER: So we don't intend to attack at dawn?

GENERAL: No.

PHILOSOPHER: Then the Germans don't know that we intend to attack at dawn. Knowledge is factive, remember.

SPY (Through gritted teeth): Alright, you pedant, two hours ago when I was bravely spying on the Germans, I discovered that they then knew that we were then intending to attack at dawn, although they don't know this any more.

GENERAL: So they don't know that we are now intending to attack at dawn?

SPY: I suppose not.

GENERAL: Then there is no need to call off the attack.

PHILOSOPHER: But if you don't call off the attack, then they will know we are going to attack.

SPY: How about this, the Germans *expect* us to attack. Expectation is not factive, so they will expect us to attack whether we attack or not.

GENERAL. I haven't got where I am today by underestimating the enemy. The Germans are in a state of constant readiness. They expect us to attack at all times. So of course they expect us to attack at dawn. What I want to know is whether

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they *know* we are going to attack at dawn.

PHILOSOPHER: Well, that's up to you, if you call off the attack, then they don't know, if you continue with the attack they do know. You see, knowledge is factive, so whether they know what we are going to do or not depends on what we decide to do.

GENERAL: Look, I may be a military man of action, but I know a thing or two about natural science, and I know that we can't affect the state of German intelligence in the town down there by these word games up here. Either the Germans know we are going to attack at dawn, or they don't. Which is it?

SPY: They know we are going to attack.

GENERAL: Then we will call off the attack.

PHILOSOPHER: Do you see? Now they don't know we are going to attack.

GENERAL: Get Out!

If we really love knowledge we should accept it for what it truly is, warts and all. What the German's had was knowledge for a while. But then it turned out false. This is because all is fair in love and war and freedom trumps factivity. You can know what someone else will choose until they find out that you know. Then they may choose not to choose that way. Knowing that a person will make a particular choice is not to make that choice for them. Until they make the choice, your knowledge is fallible.

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