

CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM OF KNOWLEDGE

As has been seen in the previous chapter (section 1.3), many of those who attempt to dethrone the critical tradition do so by rejecting the very idea of knowledge and of scientific knowledge based in method. Further attempts by sociologists of scientific knowledge, Foucault and Nietzsche along these lines are critically reviewed in Parts II to IV. In contrast, in this chapter and the next the task is more positive. They sketch some of the expectations we have concerning theories of knowledge and method, and how we might defend certain conceptions of these against attacks mounted upon them. This chapter outlines some of the issues that arise in epistemology in an attempt to spell out a satisfactory conception of knowledge, and its impact on various conceptions of scientific knowledge. As will be seen subsequently, some of the dethroners of our critical tradition have given up on the goal of knowledge and have either embraced scepticism about our ever knowing anything, or have fallen into an easy relativism.

The first section asks: 'Why bother with knowledge? Why don't we just stay with belief?' That something needs to be added to mere belief to obtain knowledge is a core doctrine within philosophy. It is even part of the core view of subjective Bayesianism, currently the dominant position in methodology. Bayesianism downplays the notion of knowledge and makes the notion of belief do much of the work of that older, grander notion. But in eschewing knowledge Bayesians do not simply adopt the notion of mere belief. Rather their interest is focused on the idea of *rational* degree of belief (i.e., one's degrees of belief must be in accord with the probability calculus). The dethroners of our critical tradition have as much difficulty with the notion of Bayesian rationality as they do with the idea of knowledge or principles of method. Since their doctrines focus on mere belief, they shun not only traditional conceptions of knowledge but also Bayesianism with its central notion of *rational* belief. Here our focus will be on knowledge, and on why it was originally suggested by Plato, and others, that there has to be more to knowledge than mere belief (or more correctly true belief). What this extra is will be called here 'the problem of Plato's tether' in honour of Plato who insisted, against the sophists and other 'postmodernist' critics of his day, that there was something else to be considered.

Often the solution to "Plato's tethering problem" has been thought to lie in some theory of justification of our beliefs; thus leading to a classical

foundationalist account of knowledge as justified true belief. One of the results that can be truly attributed to twentieth century 'analytic' philosophy is that such a theory is a non-starter.¹ However many traditional accounts of knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, have commonly been presented within the framework of such an epistemological theory. Since sociologists of science and many postmodernists reject this theory of knowledge (largely because it is foundational), then they also reject any account of the sciences that is cast within this theory of knowledge. Most philosophers would agree with the position adopted by these critics of this classical theory, but not for their reasons. In section 2.2 this theory is outlined and criticised along the lines of the Hellenistic Philosopher Agrippa who produced some of the earliest objections to it.

In rejecting the classical justificationist theory some dethroners of knowledge and method all too readily assume that *all* other theories of knowledge are to be rejected. But this does not follow. In section 2.3 the reliabilist theory of knowledge is outlined, its solution to Plato's tether problem being that for knowledge our beliefs must arise from belief-forming processes which are reliable for their truth. This is not a foundationalist theory of the sort just outlined with a commitment to certainties about immediate experience; but it does have different foundational aspects. And one of its virtues is that it can be made to fit within a naturalist framework. As will be seen, sociologists of knowledge, Foucault and Nietzsche also wish to view the formation of our beliefs within a naturalist framework. But from this they infer that there can be no role for the normative aspects of knowledge emphasised by the classical justificationist theory. It will be argued that this inference, important for their anti-rationalist stance, is faulty; and the reliabilist theory sketched will enable us to see why. In section 2.4 some aspects of a social epistemology are discussed which, in part, build on reliabilism. It is important to distinguish viable aspects of social epistemology from both empirical sociology of science and the non-viable sociology of scientific knowledge (see Part II) that attempts to show that there are causal links between socio-political circumstance and scientific belief (not to be confused with knowledge). Knowledge is a normative and critical notion; the normative character of knowledge and principles of method is explored in chapter 3.

2.1 KNOWLEDGE – WHY BOTHER? THE PROBLEM OF PLATO'S TETHER.

If there is one thing that distinguishes us humans from the animals it is our ability to have, and express, a potentially infinite number of beliefs. We have so evolved as animals that our brains enable us to represent, more or less accurately, features of the world in which we must survive. But our brains are

also quite fertile and can produce beliefs that do not represent reality at all. And they produce beliefs that go well beyond those bits of reality we can check by simple observation thereby leaving us in a quandary as to whether they are true or not. Such is the case with our most primitive beliefs about spirits, gods, souls, witches, and the like, that populate the myths and stories of religious world-views, both early and recent. Our most self-conscious enterprise for getting belief, namely science, also makes claims about what we cannot observe, from sub-atomic particles to tectonic plates and neutron stars. But even here we have made erroneous postulations about unobservables, such as the alleged existence of celestial spheres, epicycles and deferents postulated in pre-Copernican astronomy and even the astronomy of Copernicus himself, the electromagnetic ether of nineteenth century theories of light, and so on.

Given our proneness to belief, and even our all too easy disposition to credulousness, there ought to be a subject that studies the epidemiology of belief in a population of believers spread over a historic-geographic region. We find such a study embryonically in history from Herodotus onwards, and in our current sciences of social psychology, sociology and anthropology. Daniel Sperber's book *Explaining Culture: a Naturalist Approach* outlines such a study under the description 'the epidemiology of representations' (Sperber (1996), chapters 3 and 4). Its focus is not so much on the truth value of the contained belief but on, first, describing the epidemiology of belief, and secondly, and even more importantly, providing an explanation, within a naturalist (or scientific) framework, of that epidemiology. As will be seen, the theorists discussed in this book, sociologists of science, Foucault and Nietzsche, are epidemiologists of certain kinds of belief; and they do attempt to find naturalistic explanations of belief. The serious objections raised here against their projects have to do much more with the explanations they offer of the epidemiology they detect than the epidemiology itself.

2.1.1 *Why Bother With a Distinction Between Knowledge and Belief?*

So far, there has been no talk of knowledge, only belief. Given our credulousness some more discerning believers wish to impose a 'filter' on our beliefs. We might use a filter to ensure that we take on board only those beliefs that make us feel comfortable, secure, happy, or whatever. Or beliefs might be selected for the functional role they play. Thus Hume marvelled at the fact of the 'easiness with which the many are governed by the few' and offered the following early explanation in terms of the ideological function of belief:

When we enquire by what means this wonder is affected, we shall find, that, as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded; and

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