CAN I KNOW ANYTHING AT ALL?
A CLAIM TO KNOW...

• To ‘know’ something is to make a claim to truth – it is not the same as believing something to be true.

• If someone claims to ‘know’ that it will not rain tomorrow and it does rain, then the claim to knowledge was false.

• WHAT CAN WE KNOW? This has been the central question for philosophy for 2500 years!

• It is still as relevant as ever.

• What everybody thinks is the case does not mean that this is correct.
Many today consider that the only things we can ‘know’ are those things that are established by science... but this raises more questions than it answers!

What was ‘known’ to be true in science a hundred years ago is, in many cases, now ‘known’ to be false.

SO WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW?

Is it any more than accepting what the rest of your friends or community think is true??
For more than 2500 years philosophers have sought FOUNDATIONS for knowledge.

They have sought a bedrock of certainty – some things that are absolutely certain than can underpin everything we know.

Just as a building has a strong foundation, so it was considered that there must be some indubitable foundations for all our claims to know.
TWO MAIN FOUNDATIONS

• RENE DESCARTES doubted everything in order to arrive at ‘clear and distinct ideas’ which he thought act as a bedrock or foundation for knowledge.

• JOHN LOCKE considered that experience was the royal route to certainty and provided the foundations for knowledge.

• BOTH THOUGHT THAT THERE WERE FOUNDATIONS FOR KNOWLEDGE...
VERIFICATIONISTS

• VERIFICATIONISTS relied on sense experience.
  • They were descendants of Aristotle and Locke
• They claimed that any statement that was not a TAUTOLOGY or EMPIRICALLY VERIFIABLE was meaningless.
• NOTE that verificationists did not say statements that could not be verified were false. They were meaningless.
A.J. Ayer put the verificationist challenge like this:

• ‘The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of verifiability. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person if, and only if, he knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to describe - that is, if he knows what observations would lead him, under certain conditions, to accept the proposition as being true or reject it as being false.’

FALSIFICATIONISM

• Falsificationism originated with Anthony Flew. It is the other side of verificationism – maintaining that any statement is meaningless unless it can be falsified.

• If someone will not accept ANYTHING will disprove their wife/husband loves them, the statement is regarded as meaningless.

• Similarly, Flew holds, religious statements are meaningless. He asks: ‘What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or of the existence of, God?’

  • Anthony Flew. ‘Theology and Falsification’ in Flew and MacIntyre’s ‘New Essays in Philosophical Theology’ p. 96
EMOTIVISM

• Verificationism and Falsificationism gave rise to a movement in ethics called EMOTIVISM. Since ethical statements could not be verified, they were held to be meaningless.

• So all ethical statements are doing is to express an individual’s emotional reaction to a given situation.
  • So “ABORTION IS WRONG” can be translated as “I HAVE A NEGATIVE EMOTIONAL REACTION TO ABORTION”
  • “ASSISTED SUICIDE IS GOOD” can be translated as “I HAVE A POSITIVE EMOTIONAL REACTION TO ASSISTED SUICIDE.”

• This was sometimes called the ‘Boo/Hurrah’ theory of ethics.
• Statements about God, ethics and aesthetics, the verificationists said, were also meaningless.

• NOTE THEY WERE NOT TRUE OR FALSE – they simply had no meaning and no content.

• THEY WERE VACUOUS.

• This was who David Hume wanted to burn all books of theology because they contained no content that was ‘factually significant’ since their claims could not be verified,
Inductive Reasoning

Induction is a form of reasoning where we generalise from a whole collection of particular instances to a general conclusion – it is the basis for knowledge in science. For instance:

‘All metals conduct electricity’

‘All birds lay eggs’

• The simplest form of induction is enumerative induction:
  • Some salt being put in a pot of water dissolves → whenever salt is put in a pot of water it will dissolve.
The turkey found that, on his first morning at the turkey farm, he was fed at 9 a.m. Being a good inductivist turkey he did not jump to conclusions. He waited until he collected a large number of observations that he was fed at 9 a.m. and made these observations under a wide range of circumstances, on Wednesdays, on Thursdays, on cold days, on warm days. Each day he added another observation statement to his list. Finally he was satisfied that he had collected a number of observation statements to inductively infer that "I am always fed at 9 a.m.". However on the morning of Christmas eve he was not fed but instead had his throat cut."
CONFIRMATION BIAS

- Popper argued that if you are in the grip of a theory it is easy to find confirming instances, especially if the theory is vague and general.
- In other words you will tend to find evidence that supports your theory.
  - This is happening in the U.S. today – and everywhere else!
• There is a tendency for most people to read newspapers and to access media outlooks which confirm their own views of the world.

• In the U.S. the millions of supporters of President Trump and the NRA rely very heavily on Fox News, Breitbart and Murdoch owned newspapers.

• Opponents of President Trump will access for instance CNN, the Washington Post and The New York Times.

• THESE ARE EXAMPLES OF CONFIRMATION BIAS.

• Children are brought up to see the world through the eyes of their parents and peers – they tend, with rare exceptions, not to seek objective knowledge…
In every area you study – geography, science, psychology, politics, religion, mathematics, drugs in sport, history – the issue of what we can KNOW matters.

But the more you study the idea of knowledge the more complex and less satisfactory it becomes!
This brings together genetics, biology and sociology in a single discipline that seeks to explain all human behaviour. Thus evolutionary psychologists say:

- ‘Teenage girls spend more time on their appearance when they are ovulating – this is explained by biology causing them to want to make themselves attractive for reproductive purposes’.
- ‘Countries and groups fight each other – this is explained by the survival of the fittest and conflict is caused by competition to ensure reproductive success’.

EVALUATE THESE CLAIMS!
CONCLUSION …

Scientific theories cannot be conclusively verified or falsified.
A paradigm is an overarching theory shared by a community of scientists which is used to make sense of some aspect of reality. Examples: Newtonian mechanics, atomic theory, evolutionary theory.

According to Kuhn, the history of science does not consist in the steady accumulation of knowledge but is punctuated by revolutions in thinking (‘paradigm shifts’).

Most science is what Kuhn calls ‘normal science’ because it is conducted within an established paradigm – gathering new observations, trying to solve minor problems etc.

However, when a number of serious anomalies accumulate, some scientists will begin to question core assumptions of the paradigm and search for an alternative.
THOMAS KUHN (1922-96)

**Progress**

**Smooth progress**

**Time**

**Progress**

**Revolution**

**Normal science**

**Revolution**

**Normal science**

**Time**
• Aristotelian physics → Newtonian mechanics
• Geocentric → heliocentric model of the universe
• Creation by God → The Darwin and Natural Selection
• Newtonian mechanics → Einstein’s theory of relativity
• Darwin → Jean Baptiste Lamarck resurrected…
PARADIGM SHIFTS

• Thomas Kuhn suggested that science advances by ‘paradigm shifts’ – shifts from one way of doing science to another. This means a shift of conceptual framework.

• The trouble is that supporters of the old framework will tend to resist any challenge to ‘received wisdom’

• Scientists gain recognition by their papers being cited in refereed journals – but acceptance by these journals is not easy if ‘received wisdom’ is questioned.
The idea that the universe had a beginning was based on an increasing number of observations including the background radiation from the singularity, ‘red shift’ of light and many other factors.

Ten years ago, most scientists accepted the ‘Big Bang’.

Today this is under challenge from a wide range of alternative theories – although it remains the most widely held.

The paradigm changed from STEADY STATE to SINGULARITY and may not be changing to a new alternative which has not yet clearly emerged.
As a junior doctor in 1984, Barry Marshall was sure the medical establishment was wrong about the cause of stomach ulcers. People believed that ulcers were due to stress, bad diet, alcohol and susceptible genes. Marshall believed ulcers were due to bacteria – but received wisdom was that no bacteria could live in the stomach. Working with a pathologist he found a bacterium called ‘Helicobacter pylori’ in all duodenal ulcer patients and in 77% of gastric ulcer patients.
Marshall swallowed the bacteria. He did not consult the ethics committee nor tell his wife. Within three days he was in pain, was nauseous and developed gastritis. Shortly after ulcers developed.

He published his research but no-one took any notice. He was not a gastroenterologist and had no established track record. His research was ignored. Gastroenterologists knew nothing about microbiology in those days...

Watson cured people with chronic ulcers in weeks but it took until 1989 for ‘The Lancet’ to use the word ‘cure’.

It took another eight years before the results were accepted – meanwhile millions suffered.

Marshall considered it immoral that established doctors refused to listen...
Kuhn emphasises the importance of psychological and social factors in disposing scientists to adopt or reject a certain paradigm – age, personality, professional status, academic community, background beliefs, the influence of funding bodies, etc.
• The change from one paradigm to another has been likened to a gestalt switch – the character of the experience as a whole changes.

• A Copernican looking at the sunset sees the Sun stay still and the horizon rise, while a Ptolemaic astronomer sees the horizon stay still as the sun falls behind it.
• ‘... the historian of science may be tempted to exclaim that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them. Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before. It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to a different planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light ...’ (Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*)
TAKE ISSUES LIKE..

• Are human beings free?
• Is there life after death?
• Is telepathy possible?
• Can mind alter matter?
• Is there a distinction between good and bad, right and wrong?

• Many verificationists would say ‘NO’ as there is no empirical proof that these are true.
• BUT LACK OF PROOF IS NOT THE SAME AS LACK OF TRUTH..
• The current paradigm may reject these (and may be right to do so) but this could also be mistaken.
ARE ALL ETHICS CULTURALLY RELATIVE?
GREAT DIVERGENCES IN ETHICS

• Some cultures make homosexuality punishable by death, others do not.
• Some have the death penalty, others to not.
• Some have the age of sexual consent as 16, others at 18, 15, 14, 12 or puberty.
• Some cultures allow FGM and others do not.
• Some cultures approve the killing of those who are ‘different’ and others do not.
• Some cultures allow a man to have four wives, others allow only one wife at a time.
• Some cultures allow abortion on demand, others do not.

THE CASE FOR ETHICAL RELATIVISM SEEMS STRONG
ONE COULD ARGUE FOR ETHICS BASED ON A HOLY BOOK

- Jews, Christians and Muslims will, in many cases, look to a holy book – Torah, Bible or Qur’an – as the basis for ethics.

- The problem is to decide WHICH book and then to decide how it is to be interpreted.
  - Which commands are culturally relative?
  - How does one apply these commands to modern day ethical problems?
  - Many non-religious people will simply reject the idea of holy books having any authority.

- So how can one hold onto any absolute basis for ethics?
• Aristotle argued that ethics should be grounded in the common human nature we all share.
• There are ways of realising human potential, and other forms of behaviour that lead us away from fulfilling this potential.
• This, it is argued, is not just a matter of opinion... but is grounded in philosophy, psychology and sociology.

• CERTAIN FORMS OF BEHAVIOUR LEAD US AWAY FROM FULFILLING HUMAN POTENTIAL.
KEY NATURAL LAW ASSUMPTIONS

1) Something is good if it fulfils its nature
   - Aristotle considers that everything (plant, animal, etc.) belonged to a particular species and had a fixed nature.

2) Human reason can work out what the nature of anything is.
   - In the case of human beings, what is worked out by reason is fully in accordance with Biblical revelation. So philosophy and theology are not opposed.

3) Everything is good if it fulfils its potential.
   - The word ‘potential’ is of central importance!
ONE DAY WE WILL ALL DIE...

- Aristotle’s question if he was here today would be “WHAT SORT OF PERSON DO YOU WANT TO BECOME?”
  - In every thought and every action we are forming our character – making the sort of person we are to become.
  - Is it all a matter of personal opinion so if a rapist or a paedophile or someone who wants to devote their life to money, power, sex or computer games then this is entirely up to him or her?
- JEAN PAUL SARTRE argues for this.
  - Life is meaningless and we must say ‘YES’ to the meaninglessness of life and to live our lives free from the constraints or religion, parents or society.

IS SARTRE RIGHT?
GOOD AND BAD, RIGHT AND WRONG

• Since all human beings share a single human nature and a single potential, if we can work out what this is, this will provide an absolute basis for ethics:
  • Certain actions are wrong or evil if they lead us away from fulfilling our potential (e.g. the Vices). They are ‘INTRINSICALLY EVIL’…
  • Certain actions are right or good if they lead us towards fulfilling our potential.
• What is good and bad, right and wrong does not depend on the consequences but on the nature of the action.
• The first and most important principle of morality is, for St. Thomas Aquinas, that ‘GOOD SHOULD BE DONE AND EVIL AVOIDED’.
• The whole of the discussion of natural law is about unpacking what these terms mean..
• Humans have a natural disposition to seek the good (‘Synderesis’) – but it is very easy to get this wrong...
Aquinas considered that the first priority laid down by natural law was that the immortal self had to be preserved.

If this self gave into desires which were based on impulse and were not rational, then it became enslaved (note the similarities to Kant here).

It was possible to deduce the natural or cardinal virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice, taken from Aristotle) by the use of reason alone.

The ten commandments were held to be examples of natural virtues - with the exception of keeping the Sabbath. These natural virtues are amplified by the revealed virtues (of faith, hope and charity - derived from St. Paul, cf I Cor. 13. 13) and the greater the extent to which these are fostered the greater will be the obedience to natural law.
Most religious people consider there is a life after death. This matters as, if we survive death, then human potential is not just defined in terms of this life!

Why is this question significant in Harry Potter??

Voldemort fears death above everything – hence he creates Horcruxes to avoid death and his followers are called ‘The Death Eaters’.
APPARENT AND REAL GOODS

• It is all too easy for human beings to pursue APPARENT GOODS rather than real goods...
  • In other words to do what they think at the time is good but which, in fact, is not.

• To say ‘my motive was good’ is not enough. Conscience, for Aquinas, is **REASON MAKING RIGHT DECISIONS**. Working out what really leads to human fulfilment and what does not.

• Doing good is closely associated with the virtues. If someone lacks any of the virtues they are likely to be swayed from the path of reason..
SO PERHAPS ETHICS IS NOT RELATIVE

• There may be ways of behaving that DIMINISH US – that lead us away from fulfilling our potential. Others may help us to fulfil our potential.

• John Stuart Mill was a great Utilitarian – the aim of life, he argued, was to be happy. YET HE SAID THAT ANYONE SEEKING THEIR OWN HAPPINESS WILL END UP IN DESPAIR AND MISERY.

• The only way to find fulfilment is to devote oneself to the good of others – to ALTRUISM.
CAN WE ‘KNOW’ WHAT IT MEANS TO FULFILL HUMAN POTENTIAL?

• Can you ‘know’ that in Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom and Dobby are better individuals than Malfoy?
• Can we ‘know’ whether we will survive death or not?
• Can we ‘know’ whether Nelson Mandela a good human being?
• Can we ‘know’ that President Trump is a better or worse human being than President Obama?
• When and if you get married, can you ‘know’ that the marriage will be a success?
THE QUESTION..

• Can science provide, eventually, a complete explanation??

• Aristotle would probably have said that it can. Plato would have said ‘no’.

• Many (not all) scientists would say ‘Yes’, religion says ‘No’

• Serious religious thinkers fully accept the findings of science. They fully accept Copernicus, Galileo and Darwin.

• The question is not whether science or religion are true but whether science can provide a complete explanation?
“THERE ARE MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH, HORATIO, THAN ARE DREAMED OF IN YOUR PHILOSOPHY”

Or in the current paradigm!