

Knowledge, Beliefs, Facts & Opinions

Middle School Philosophy Club

I. Overview

A. Thinking and Talking About: Knowledge, Beliefs, Facts and Opinions. This lesson explores the nature of knowledge: how some beliefs may also be knowledge while others fall short. It also explores opinions, and how this term covers different kinds of claims. Some opinions may be attempts to state facts, but with insufficient support, while others are claims that have subjective content.

B. Learning Aims

1. The activities introduce students to thinking about the nature of knowledge. They should learn that knowledge minimally requires truth and some at least some kind of justification or support.
2. Knowledge is contrasted with opinion, and students should begin to appreciate the diversity of kinds of beliefs that are labeled opinions.
3. Students will have an opportunity in discussion to encounter more challenging ideas relating to skepticism or to knowledge about ethical issues.

C. Target Questions

1. Does knowledge require truth?
2. Does knowledge require reasons or support?
3. Are all beliefs either knowledge or opinion?
4. Are there different kinds of knowledge/opinions?

II. Lesson Plan

A. Materials. There is a one page handout that walks through the activities; a second page lists cases to be evaluated in the small group activity (attached to this document).

B. Execution of lesson

1. Part A: Introduction and Initial Questions [Individual Activity] (5 minutes). The topic being explored by the club (e.g. “The Thinking and Talking Club”) is introduced as “knowledge, beliefs, facts and opinions”. Each student is asked to answer a list of 4 questions about knowledge.
2. Part B: Whole Group Discussion (10 minutes). We will quickly review answers that were given to the questions as a group.
3. Part C: Small Group Activity. Groups of 3-5 students are formed. Each group is asked to evaluate 3 cases and decide how they should be categorized and answer 2 questions. (20 minutes)

4. Part D: Whole Group Discussion (10 minutes). With remaining time, we will review some of the ideas that came out of the small group activity.

III. Helpful Reflections

This lesson can be given to all age groups, with more nuances added to the discussion as appropriate for older students.

IV. Philosophical Background and Further Reading

Knowledge and Beliefs

A belief is the attitude one has when one takes something to be the case or to be true. It is a very general category that encompasses everything from casual opinions about things all the way to the kind of considered judgments that might underlie a firm statement of fact. Philosophers then ask: what is it that makes something one believes *also* something that one *knows*? In other words, what ingredients must be added to a belief for it to constitute knowledge? Traditionally, the first ingredient is that the belief must actually be true (a mistaken belief can't be knowledge). Beyond this, however, more is needed, because a belief that happened to be true just by chance is not considered knowledge. The belief must also be something that we are justified in maintaining: perhaps because it is supported by reasons in the right way or gained via a reliable process. The exact way these latter ideas should be worked out is the subject of ongoing philosophical debate.

Kinds of Justification

What constitutes adequate justification or support for knowing something? This can be a complicated topic, but we will focus on the idea that support relies on gathering evidence of one kind or another. The most basic evidence is that which comes from direct observation. We trust that most of the time our senses give us reliable information about the world. With some evidence, such as scientific evidence, such observations are assisted by equipment (e.g. a microscope) that we have reason to believe is also reliable.

There is consensus that it is also, at least sometimes, sufficient to rely on another person's information (or "testimony"). But when is this OK? Sometimes we can compare the testimony to other reliable sources of evidence, but sometimes this is not possible. We sometimes decide to trust information if we believe the process by which it was obtained by others was sound. Either the person providing the testimony observed it, or, as in the case of an expert, acquired the ability to provide the information through a process of training and experience. While the decision to trust testimony is not always easy, we generally seem justified in doing so if we understand in a rough way how it was acquired and have no particular reasons for doubting it.

However, philosophers have explored deeper issues that are involved when considering knowledge based on testimony. Reflecting on how we come to acquire most of what we think we know, we can readily see that we rely heavily on indirect sources—books, television, the internet, as well as the people we know in real life. It isn't feasible that we can trace all of this back to bedrock sources that we deem most reliable. This “problem of testimonial knowledge” has no easy solution. Also, the question of whose testimony is considered a trusted source of knowledge becomes enmeshed in issues related to society at large. There are also deep questions about how the role of social structures and positions within society bear on knowledge acquisition and sharing.

But acknowledging the social dimension of knowledge justification doesn't necessarily undermine it. For instance, the acquisition of authority and expertise in scientific fields has a clear collaborative dimension. The trustworthiness of scientific sources of knowledge depends not only on training and certification processes, but also on self-checking mechanisms such as peer review of research publications and replication of experimental results. The operation of these and other social/institutional factors play key roles in assignment of authority to scientific testimony.

Facts vs. Opinions

The achievement of knowledge about something in the world means I am able to express a fact. Facts are often opposed to opinions, as when someone challenges you with the question: “Is that a fact or is it just your opinion?” So, here, we might ask if all of our beliefs that fall short of knowledge are merely opinions. The answer here is complicated by the fact that calling something an “opinion” can mean two different things.

Philosophers consider facts to be things that actually exist; they are aspects of what is real. Whether you have stated a fact is an all or nothing thing: if the statement is about something that describes how the world might be, it either expresses a fact, and is true, or, on the other hand, it expresses something that is not a fact and is false. But what if you have a fair amount of evidence for a factual claim? Even if it falls short of sufficient justification, is it right to say it is just an opinion?

Note that, by their nature, whether I am successful or not in expressing a fact must not depend on my idiosyncratic perspective as a human being. There is a contrast we can draw between statements having “objective” versus “subjective” contents. Both true and false statements about the world have objective content: their truth or falsity doesn't depend on my particular subjective point-of-view.

With this as backdrop, we can now see that “opinion” may mean two different things. First, it might refer to a statement or claim that purports to express a fact, but there is some doubt about it. But there is a second possibility: perhaps something is an “opinion”

because it isn't the kind of thing that could be either true *or* false in a way that is independent of my human perspective. This is because it expresses something subjective.

Let's look at an example of the first usage. I stub my big toe badly and declare to my friend: "My toe is broken!" She says: "You don't know it's broken—that's just your opinion." Now, whether my toe is broken is the kind of thing that is either true or false about an aspect of the world. My friend is suggesting, then, that my statement might be wrong: she is thinking I do not have good reasons in support of its truth (after all, I am no expert). Now assume that I then visit the emergency room. The doctor examines my toe and takes X-rays, and subsequently concludes my toe is indeed broken. Having relayed this news to my friend, she now considers it a fact that "my toe is broken". The statement has been appropriately justified or supported (by an experienced doctor using appropriate tools and methods).

In contrast, assume I say: "Vanilla ice cream is much better than chocolate." Now if I am accused of merely offering an opinion, this is for a different reason. The statement has no truth or falsity apart from my perspective: it is subjective. As a simple test, the difference between the two uses of opinion can be judged by whether we can imagine it to be true or not independent of the beliefs and feelings of particular human beings. In the broken toe case, my particular feelings played a role in my making the initial assertion (my toe is broken!), but my beliefs and feelings played no role in determining the statement's truth or falsity. In the ice cream case, it is my personal feeling or preference that is being directly expressed.

While the word "opinion" is used in both ways, the difference should be noted. If I have some evidence to support my belief about something, but others think my justification is insufficient, this is not the same thing as just expressing a subjective preference.

Skepticism

But can we ever be 100% certain of our facts? For instance, looking back at the example, surely my doctor is not infallible, and might make a mistake reading my X-ray. Related to this concern is the idea that statements of fact demand definitive "proof." But can we actually prove our facts?

Philosophers will usually say that "proof" is not a notion that applies to claims about the world (it is a concept defined within logic and mathematics). One suggestion is that we should refrain from asserting statements of facts, and instead offer our "considered judgements." On the other hand, sometimes we are so sure something is true that to doubt it seems unreasonable. My cat is 10 years old, I am currently residing in Philadelphia, and there is soda in the fridge. To entertain skepticism in such cases ("I might be delusional/hallucinating" or "we might all be living in a computer simulation!") isn't

helpful in everyday life. So, maintaining the distinction between statements of fact (well-supported by reasons or evidence) and other statements about the world that are more clearly disputable seems fine, keeping in mind that if these latter are labeled “opinions”, these need to be contrasted with statements of personal feelings or preferences.

Religious and Moral Beliefs

A tricky area concerns belief about God or about what is right or wrong. Can these beliefs ever be considered knowledge? The difficult issue is deciding whether, like the factual claims considered above, these beliefs have objective content (can be true or false), or whether they necessarily fall into the subjective category where the claim depends on a human point-of-view. What constitutes evidence for or against a theological claim? Or take, for example, the nearly universally accepted moral claim that it is wrong to own other people. Does this correspond to something true about the world? On the one hand, we have strong moral convictions that seem to transcend mere opinion. At the same time, it is not clear how these correspond to a feature of reality. And of course, there are many disputed moral claims. Consider: Is it wrong to steal food from the store to give to really hungry neighborhood children whose parents have lost their jobs? Is stealing always wrong or are there permitted exceptions? Religious traditions and some philosophical approaches postulate the existence of objective moral rules or facts. Establishing their existence, however, is very difficult, however, and many consider the moral sphere to be essentially about human beings and their judgements and actions, rather than about the world independent of us.

Further Reading

John Corvino: “The Fact/Opinion Distinction”

<https://www.philosophersmag.com/essays/26-the-fact-opinion-distinction>

Christopher Lammer-Heindel: “Facts & Opinions”

https://philosophynow.org/issues/115/Facts_and_Opinions

Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: “Epistemology” <https://iep.utm.edu/epistemo/>

THINK ABOUT IT!

Knowledge, Beliefs, Facts, and Opinions

Part A: Do Now - Individual Activity

Can you know something that isn't true? Yes No

Do you have to have reasons for believing something in order for your belief to count as knowledge? Yes No

Is every belief either a piece of knowledge or an opinion? Yes No

...because

Are some opinions more valid than others? Yes... No...

...because

Part B: Whole Group Discussion. We will ask everyone about their answers.

Part C: Small Group Activity - Knowledge vs. Opinion

In your small group, you will consider three imaginary cases involving people who hold certain beliefs. In each case, is the person's belief a piece of knowledge, an opinion, or something else? Why? If it's an opinion, how valid is it? Write your responses on a big piece of paper.

Part D: Whole Group Discussion: When everyone is finished, a representative from each group will present their group's ideas to the class.

SCENARIOS FOR PART B

Group 1

Ava believes there are 47 cats in her apartment building. She doesn't have any particular reason for believing this; it's just a hunch. But as it turns out, she's right!

Ben believes you should always smile at the people you pass on the street.

Christine believes Rome is the capital of Italy because that's what her geography teacher told her.

Group 2

Damien believes Earth will be visited by aliens within the next two hundred years. He believes this because he has thought really hard about the probability of intelligent life on other planets.

Eve believes the glass of water she put outside on the window sill will freeze soon. It's 42°F outside.

Frankie believes eating fruits and vegetables is good for your health because scientific studies show that people who eat lots of fruits and vegetables are less likely to get certain diseases.

Group 3

Georgia believes every child has the right to a good education.

Harper believes the sun will rise tomorrow morning because it always does, and because he learned about the rotation of the earth in school.

Inez believes Van Gogh's *Starry Night* is the most beautiful painting in the world.

