



"I'd say it's your gallbladder, but if you insist on a second opinion, I'll say kidneys."

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION

Mortimer Adler

Today, as we continue with the discussion of Opinion, we shall try to push further our understanding of the difference between knowing and opining. There are a number of questions we ought to consider.

First, what sort of objects are the objects of knowledge, as opposed to the objects about which we can only have opinions? Second, what is the psychological difference between knowing and opining as acts of the mind? Third, can we have knowledge and opinion

about one and the same thing? And finally, a fourth question, what is the scope of knowledge? How much knowledge do we really have as opposed to the kinds of things about which we can only have opinions? What is the limit or scope of opinion in the things of our mind? And these are the questions we are going to try to answer as we proceed today.

I would like to develop a little further the educational implications of a point that we discussed last time. It concerns knowledge and opinion in relation to the truth. We saw last time that knowledge is always true; you can't have false knowledge, but that opinion may be either true or false.

Now let's use the phrase "right opinion" to signify any opinion which happens as a matter of fact to be true. So we must ask the question, What's the difference between knowledge and right opinion? Since both are true, how do they differ? And I think we began to see the answer last time. When you have truth through knowledge, you not only have the truth, but you understand why it is true. But when you have the truth through having only a right opinion, you may have the truth in fact but you will not understand why it is true.

IT'S BETTER TO BE IGNORANT THAN WRONG

Now let me introduce two other terms into our discussion: *error* and *ignorance*. Everyone knows, I'm sure, that when one is in error or when one is ignorant, one does not have the truth. Then how do they differ? Well, they differ as follows: The person who is in error not only lacks the truth, but does not know that he does not know. On the contrary, he supposes that he does know; whereas the person who is ignorant lacks the truth and in addition knows that he does not know.

Knowledge is to right opinion on the side of truth as ignorance is to error on the side of lack of truth. The understood truth, which is knowledge, is to the not understood truth which is right opinion; as the understood lack of truth, which is ignorance, is to the misunderstood lack of truth which is error.

Lloyd Luckman: I wonder how many people have thought about this problem just this way before. Are you in fact saying that it's better to be in ignorance than in error?

Mortimer Adler: That's precisely what I'm suggesting, Lloyd. And I suspect that when I say this, when I say that ignorance is more like knowledge than error is, some of you may think it's a

shocking mistake to suppose so. But though this may seem paradoxical, I think that I can explain to you why it is so. Any teacher will tell you that it is much easier to teach a student who is ignorant than one who is in error, because the student who is in error on a given point thinks that he knows whereas in fact he does not know. The student who is ignorant is in a much better condition to learn. It is almost necessary to take the student who is in error and first correct the error before you can teach him. I think that is the meaning of saying that error is further away from knowledge than ignorance is. The path from ignorance to knowledge is a shorter path than the path from error to knowledge, because if a person is in error, you must first get rid of the error and reduce him to ignorance before you can start teaching him.

Socrates was the first teacher to discover this principle of teaching and to apply it in practice. He opined all the time. It was the first principle in his method. His method was to go about, as he said himself, “cross-examining the pretenders to knowledge and wisdom,” and by the cross-examination, showing them that they were in error, that what they supposed they knew, they did not know. That is first reducing them to ignorance so that they could be in the right state of mind to inquire and to learn.

This technique of Socrates was a very annoying technique. And that, combined with the fact that he was very fond of saying ironically that his only wisdom consisted in his knowing that he didn't know, and acknowledging his ignorance, so infuriated his fellow citizens that they put him to death.

As we go on to explore the psychological difference between knowing and opining as acts of the mind, I think we will see some further educational implications of this distinction between knowledge and opinion.

SCHOOLCHILDREN MAINLY LEARN OPINIONS

I would like to begin by recalling for you two insights, one that we find in Plato and one in Aristotle. The Greeks, particularly Plato and Aristotle, were very much concerned about this matter of the difference between knowledge and opinion. Plato tells us that knowledge and only knowledge is teachable; right opinion is not teachable because it is not founded in reasons, it has no principles, it has no roots or grounds in things for which it can be demonstrated.

Most of the things that children learn in school are right opinion, not knowledge. All one has to do, I suppose, is to recall how one

learns history or geography. These things, being right opinions, can only be learned by a kind of memorization. Compare that with the teaching or learning of geometry, which really can be taught and learned in a rational manner because such truth that is there rests in principles and in the demonstration of conclusions.

Aristotle's insight on this subject is that one man can opine about what another man knows. They can be thinking of the same things, but whereas the one man merely has an opinion, the other man can have knowledge on that very same subject.

Let me see if I can illustrate this for you by an example from geometry. I have here a diagram taken from Euclid that represents the famous Pythagorean Theorem. The theorem is that the square on the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. Now the teacher who knows the demonstration of this conclusion in geometry understands why it is true and therefore has knowledge of this proposition. But the student, who repeating the words of the Pythagorean Theorem and then being asked why is that true, says, "Because my professor told me," doesn't have knowledge of this truth but only has a right opinion of it because he is holding it on the authority of his teacher, and in that way alone.

What this tells us is that when anyone argues from authority, when anyone holds an opinion or holds a position, says something is true, on authority and authority alone, he is holding it as a matter of opinion. And whenever a teacher appeals to his authority to persuade the students to believe something, that teacher isn't teaching; he's really only indoctrinating them; he is forming right opinions in their minds.

Lloyd Luckman: As I listen to you, I wonder really how much actual imparting of knowledge does go on in our schools and colleges. Just how many subjects are there in the curriculum which are teachable, and by that I mean matters about which the students can actually obtain knowledge?

Mortimer Adler: That's a very hard question to answer, Mr. Luckman. A good one but a hard one. And we may find some answer to it when presently we draw the line that divides the realm of knowledge from the realm of opinion.

OPINIONS ARE ACCEPTED VOLUNTARILY

Before we do that, let's see if we can understand the thing that we've been leading up to, just what the psychological difference is

between the act of knowing and the act of opining. Let me state it for you quickly at once. We opine when the assent of our minds is voluntary. We know when the assent we give to something is involuntary. Now that statement may not come clear at once. Let me illustrate it.

If I say to you, "Is this truth? Is it true that two plus two equals four?" you do not make up your mind. If you think about this, what you are thinking about makes up your mind for you. Let me show you that one other way. I hold up two cigarettes. I hold up two more cigarettes. Two cigarettes and two cigarettes, I bring them together, and I ask you the question, "Are there four cigarettes here?" can you give me the answer "No"? You cannot. You aren't free to. You are compelled by what you are looking at to say, "Yes, the answer is four." That shows it is knowledge.

But if I ask you to consider this other statement that we've been using as an example of opinion, the statement itself doesn't compel you to say yes or no. You can say either yes or no. The statement leaves you quite free to make up your own mind. And because it leaves you quite free, either on authority or because of your desires or your interests or your emotions or your passions, anything to make up your mind, this is psychologically an act of opinion on your part, not an act of knowledge.

A statement expresses knowledge when our assent to it is involuntary, when our assent to it is compelled or necessitated by the object we are thinking about, as in the case of two plus two equals four. But a statement expresses opinion, not knowledge, when our assent to it is voluntary, when the object leaves us quite free to make up our own minds to think this way or that way about the object, to think about the object exactly as we please.

And usually, in the case of opinions, what makes up our mind one way or the other is not the thing we are thinking about, but our emotions, our desires, our interests, or some authority upon which we are relying. Thus you can see that the nature of opinion is wishful thinking. It is an exercise of the will to believe. And when one is holding mere opinion, one finds the emotional content very high indeed. Precisely in proportion as the opinion is not well-founded in fact or evidence, one tends to support it with one's emotions and to be obstinate in holding onto it as one holds onto a prejudice. I know this in my own case when I find that I am saying, "No, no. That is not so. That isn't so." I'm sure I'm right about that with emphasis and great thought, I suspect that I am holding an opinion without much evidence to support it. And I am putting it in my

emotions, making up by my emotions for the lack of evidence.

I think, Mr. Luckman, that this has a bearing on your last question about teaching. Many of the things taught in school may not be knowledge in the strict sense. But if they are not mere opinion in this sense, if they are well-founded opinion, opinions that have probabilities resting on the evidence, and moreover if the teacher appeals to the intellect of the student, weighing the evidences, weighing the probabilities, and does not merely appeal to his own authority to persuade the student, then he is teaching them in a very genuine sense, even if it is only opinion rather than knowledge. But on the other hand, if the teacher appeals to the emotions of the student and heavily relies upon his own authority to persuade them, then he isn't teaching them but indoctrinating them. Does that answer your question?

Lloyd Luckman: Well, yes, in part it does. But I would still like to know how much of what is learned in school is really knowledge in the stricter sense, that is, opposed to the very best sort of opinion, as you have been putting it, this highly probable opinion, based on evidence, and so forth.

SKEPTICS DENY THAT WE HAVE KNOWLEDGE

Mortimer Adler: Let's see if we can find the answer to that question. As a matter of fact, I want to say "the answers" to that question, because there are two answers to that question, one given by the skeptic, the man who thinks that there is very little knowledge; the other given by the opponent of the skeptic, the man who thinks that there is considerably more knowledge.

Let me start out with the skeptical view and begin by stating the position of a man who in modern times represents the extreme of skepticism. That man is the French essayist, Montaigne. Montaigne says that we know nothing; everything is a matter of opinion. "And we mustn't be fooled," he says, "by the feelings which we sometimes have of certainty," the feeling that the thing is perfectly clear and sure for us.

The argument the skeptic uses against the persons who say, "Well, I feel certain about that" to show them that they oughtn't to be certain, is the argument coming from the illusions of the senses, perceptual illusions. You know, there are optical illusions, where two lines on a page look as if they were of very unequal lengths though they are in fact equal, or where two circles look to be of different sizes, though they are in fact the same size.

Now a more moderate skepticism is that of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. David Hume took the position that we do have some knowledge. Our knowledge consists in sciences like mathematics where we do begin with axioms or self-evident truths and are able to demonstrate conclusions. But Hume says this is all the knowledge we have. In all of history, in all of the experimental sciences we have only, according to Hume, at best, highly probable opinion.

Let me read you Hume's famous statement that summarizes this point. I have here a volume of Hume and this statement, by the way, is easy to find because it comes at the very end of Hume's great *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. He asks the question, "If we take in our hand any volume . . . , let us ask," he says, "Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?"; that is, Is it a work in mathematics? Or let us ask, "Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence?", that is, Is it a work in experimental science? If the answer to both these questions is no, Hume says, "Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

Now what is Hume saying in this very famous passage? He is saying that only in mathematics do we have the certitude of knowledge, and that we have such certitude only when we are thinking about the relations between our own ideas, our own concepts.

Whereas in regard to all matters of fact or real existence, we have experimental reasoning. And this, according to Hume, is at best probable. And because it is probable, it is opinion, not knowledge, even though there is highly probable evidence in support of some opinion. For Hume everything else which is not experimental science or mathematics is worse than that. And he puts philosophy here. It is sheer opinion, not even probable opinion, but mere superstition or prejudice.

Now in our day we have gone even further toward the skeptical extreme than Hume went. Because in our day with our knowledge of non-Euclidean geometry, we tend to doubt that even mathematics is knowledge. Mathematical systems, like Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry, seem to be based upon postulates or assumptions rather than on self-evident principles.

I have a letter in my file, if I can find it, on this subject that I would like to read to you. A man writes that "Even two plus two equals four," he says, "only if you assume certain things." And he goes on

to say that mathematics is simply a man-made system of logic consistent with itself. And therefore in view of this he wants to know whether mathematics should properly be called knowledge. “And if you call mathematics knowledge,” he says, “then is any body of statements, based on certain assumptions and consistently developed therefrom, knowledge?” And my answer to that question is no. If mathematics were only based on assumption and nothing else, on postulates rather than axioms, then I would say it was opinion, not knowledge.

THE ANSWER TO THE SKEPTIC

Now what is the answer to the skeptic? I have stated the skeptic’s position; let me now give the answer to the skeptic. First of all, on the matter of perceptual illusion. How do we know they are illusions? If we know they are illusions, we can only know it because we regard some sense perceptions as accurate. If we could not have some perceptions verified as clear and acceptable perceptions, we couldn’t know these others were illusions.

When we have two lines on a page that look to be of different lengths, we can put down a ruler against each of them, we can measure them. This convinces us they are really the same length.


Here we are correcting an illusory perception by performing a measurement, but the measurement is itself also a perception. If this perception were not knowledge, I couldn’t call the wrong perception an illusion. Hence, to even discover that there are perceptual illusions, I have to rely upon perceptions, I have to know by perceiving.

And then with regard to mathematics, the opponent of the skeptic answers by saying, I think quite rightly in this case, that mathematics is not based only on assumptions but upon axioms, self-evident truths. And that not only mathematics but metaphysics and other branches of philosophical science are knowledge in the same sense.

As for history and experimental science, even the opponent of the skeptic is likely to agree with the skeptic on this point; that these subjects are not knowledge, but highly probable opinion. In fact, we might say that experimental science is a kind of conditional knowledge, conditional upon the state of the evidence at a given time.

One final reply to the skeptic is this, that the skeptic, particularly when he is an extreme skeptic and says that everything is a matter

of opinion, can't argue for his case. He can't defend his case, for he would try to prove his point, he would establish that something was knowledge and so defeat himself.

I think, Lloyd, that you now have some indication at least of the two leading answers, the two opposed answers to your question about what is taught in school, about how much of it is strictly knowledge and how much of it is only probable opinion. 

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