

Knowledge and Objectivity

Carlotta Pavese

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Outline

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- 1 So knowledge does not merely require belief, or merely truth of the proposition known.
- 2 Knowledge requires **true belief**.
- 3 Does it mean that knowledge requires **objective truth**?

Knowledge and objectivity

Distinguish between two questions:

- 1 *Are there any objective facts?*

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- 1 *Are there any objective facts?*
- 2 *Are all facts objective?*

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- 1 For instance, Mt. Everest is 8850 m tall. That's how far it rises above sea level.
- 2 And Mt. Everest doesn't care very much about whether we exist or what we know.
- 3 Mt. Everest would still be 8850 m tall no matter what any of us knew or believed or had evidence for believing.

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- 2 It would not. What we'd have done in that case would be to change what object it is we're talking about when we use the word "Mt. Everest."
- 3 The old object—the object we used to call "Mt. Everest"—would still have the same height.
- 4 And that's all that's being claimed by the philosophers who say that the facts about Mt. Everest's height are **objective**.

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- 1 You may think: “what is true **for you** may not be **true for somebody else.**”
- 2 But what are you really saying?
- 3 Suppose we say that it is **true for Mario** that Mt Everest is 5000 meters high.

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What are we really saying?

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What are we really saying?

- 1 That Mario believes it to be true that Mt Everest is 5000 meters high.
- 2 But that is compatible with Mario being wrong about it!

Is every fact objective?

In some areas, like aesthetics, it might be less clear whether or not there are objective facts.

Is every fact objective?

It is true for my husband that steaks are the most delicious meal. But it is not true for me.



Are there any objective facts?



It is true for me that Francis Bacon is a great artist. But it is not true for my mom, who finds him terrifying.

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- 1 Usually, in areas that have to do with taste, it is possible to disagree on some matter, without both sides being neither right nor wrong.
- 2 But if I and my friend disagree about whether or not Mt Everest is 5000 meters high, either me or her has to be wrong!
- 3 So we can use **the disagreement test** to see what facts are objective and which facts are less so.

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- 1 If one can disagree with another about whether X is true, without either being necessarily wrong about it, then the truth of X is **relative**.

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- 1 If one can disagree with another about whether X is true, without either being necessarily wrong about it, then the truth of X is **relative**.
- 2 If instead, one of the two parties has to be wrong, then the truth of X is not relative, but **objective**.

Two distinct questions

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Two distinct questions

- 1 So the question *whether there are any objective facts* is definitely different from the question *whether every fact is objective*.
- 2 Probably not every fact is objective. But at least some facts are likely to be objective!

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- 2 I am not even saying *that Mark knows that steak is delicious for himself*. I am not reporting Mark's own preferences!
- 3 In other words, when we ascribe knowledge we tend to perceive the object known as somewhat objective, even in areas where objectivity is the most controversial.

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- 2 For instance, suppose you're cutting eggs for a salad and I'm cutting the tomatoes. We're each using the same kitchen gadget, you with good results and me with frustrating results. If you say "This kitchen gadget is useful," I might respond "That may be true for you, but it's not true for me."

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Verificationism

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- 2 If you're a **verificationist** about certain kinds of fact, then you reject the idea that those facts are objective.

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- 2 The verificationist believes that it's impossible for all the evidence to point one way but the facts about your height to be otherwise.

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Verificationism

- 1 According to Verificationism in a domain, the facts have to be constrained by the evidence.
- 2 According to the Verificationist, it doesn't make sense to talk about a situation where everybody is permanently and irremediably mistaken about your height, where the "real facts" are so well-concealed that no one will be able to ferret them out.
- 3 If the "real facts" are so well-concealed, says the Verificationist, then they cease being facts at all.

Verificationism's consequences

- 1 According to Verificationism, what is true for us depends on the evidence available...on what we are **capable of coming to know**.

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- 2 Verificationism has weird consequences.

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- 1 Most of us think that Mt. Everest had its height well before there were any human beings and that it would still have this height even if no human beings or other thinking subjects had ever existed.

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- 1 Most of us think that Mt. Everest had its height well before there were any human beings and that it would still have this height even if no human beings or other thinking subjects had ever existed.
- 2 But it's not clear that a Verificationist is entitled to say things like that.

Verificationism

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Verificationism

- 1 If there had never been any thinking subjects, then there wouldn't have been anybody who could have had evidence that Mt. Everest existed.
- 2 So according to the Verificationist, then, there wouldn't have been anybody for whom it was true that Mt. Everest is 8,850 m tall.
- 3 It looks like the Verificationist has to deny that Mt. Everest would still have been 8,850 m tall, even in situations where no thinking subjects had ever existed.

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- 3 Granted, in the situation we're envisaging, nobody actually has evidence that Mt. Everest is 8850 m tall. But the evidence is still **available**. (Mt. Everest will cast shadows of certain lengths at certain times of the day, and so on.)

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- 1 This is what makes Verificationism such a strange view.
- 2 Perhaps the Verificationist could respond as follows:
- 3 Granted, in the situation we're envisaging, nobody actually has evidence that Mt. Everest is 8850 m tall. But the evidence is still **available**. (Mt. Everest will cast shadows of certain lengths at certain times of the day, and so on.)
- 4 And if people had existed, they could have gathered and used that evidence. Maybe that's enough to make it true that Mt. Everest is still 8,850 m tall in the situation we're envisaging.

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Verificationism

- 1 But in some cases, it is not obvious the evidence would be even available.
- 2 There may be no way for any finite being to ascertain what is the number of stars in the universe.
- 3 And yet, surely, whatever number it is, it is either even or odd!

Conclusion

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Conclusion

- 1 According to Verificationism, whether something is a fact depends on whether it is possible to discover that it is:
Unknowable facts are impossible.
- 2 Verificationism is an interesting but problematic view.
- 3 In the following of this class, I will set it aside and assume that there are **objective** facts, facts that hold independently of us and of any evidence we might have.