

Chapter 1

An Observation

Someone glances at a clock that is not working and comes to believe it is quarter past seven. It in fact is quarter past seven. Her belief is true, but it isn't knowledge. Out of this classic example comes a classic philosophical question: what must be added to a true belief in order to make it into a plausible candidate for knowledge?

The answer is to be found in the observation that whenever someone has a true belief but does not know, there is important information she lacks. Seemingly a modest point, but it has the capacity to reorient the theory of knowledge.

For this observation to be philosophically useful, information needs to be understood independently of knowledge. The everyday notions of knowledge and information are intertwined, but every philosophical account has to start somewhere, helping itself to assumptions that can be revisited if they lead to difficulties. I begin by assuming that having information is a matter of having true beliefs.¹

Substituting true belief for information, the core observation becomes that when someone has a true belief

but does not know, there is some significant aspect of the situation about which she lacks true beliefs—something important that she doesn't grasp or doesn't quite "get." Knowledge is a matter of having adequate information, where the test of adequacy is negative. One must not lack important true beliefs. One knows that a red ball is on the mat in the hallway if one believes that this is so, the belief is true, and there is no important gap in one's information.

Information comes in various sizes and shapes, however. The red ball on the mat in the hallway has a precise circumference. It has a definite weight. It is made of rubber. The rubber is a certain shade of red. The mat likewise has its specific characteristics. So does the hallway. Its ceiling is of a certain height. Its walls are covered with black walnut paneling. There is a mahogany door leading outside. There are historical truths about the situation as well. The black walnut paneling was installed last year. The ball was bought two months ago at a Target store in Brooklyn. These historical truths are connected with yet others. The rubber making up the ball came from a tree grown on a rubber plantation in Kerala, India, which also grows tea. There is also negative information. The ball is not made of steel and is not larger than a standard basketball. There is not a bicycle in the hallway. Nor is there a truck or an oak tree. The hallway does not have a linoleum floor.

There is no end to the truths associated with there being a red ball on the mat in the hallway. They radiate out in all directions. Nor is this unusual. Every situation is lush, brimming over with truths.

The information we have is by comparison arid. No one, no matter how well informed, is in possession of all

truths about a situation. If the number of such truths is not infinite, it is at least mind numbingly vast. Our grasps of situations are inevitably partial. Not all partial grasps are equal, however. Sometimes the information we lack is important, but sometimes not. If not, we know.

Whether a true belief counts as knowledge thus hinges on the importance of the information one has and lacks. This means that questions of knowledge cannot be separated from questions about human concerns and values. It also means that there is no privileged way of coming to know. Knowledge is a mutt. Proper pedigree is not required. What matters is that one not lack important nearby information.

This is getting ahead of the story, however. The best way to get a handle on this way of thinking about knowledge and to see how it reorients the theory of knowledge is to contrast it with received views.