The Tripartite Theory of Knowledge.

Knowledge, for Plato, has to be about what is true – so he makes a distinction between what we just believe – things that may or may not be true – and knowledge which is what we know to be true. In order to know something is true we have to have some kind of justification for our belief. That gives us two conditions for ‘knowledge’.

1. We have to believe it.
2. We have to have some kind of justification for believing it.

So it’s not enough just to say that something is true just because ‘I know it’s true!’ – we have to have some kind of evidence or argument that gives a justification for our belief. But there is one other condition that has to apply as well – we have to be right – what we believe and what we think we have justification for – does also have to be true. That gives us the third part of the ‘Tripartite Theory of Knowledge’ – for something to be ‘knowledge’ and not just our belief – it has to be ‘Justified, true belief’.

Let’s take an example to demonstrate this point. Imagine the following scenario:

‘The Prime Minister says that crime rates will go down next year.’

Is this a piece of knowledge according to the tripartite theory? According to the tripartite theory, the Prime Minister can only be said to have knowledge if:

He believes that crime rates will go down (ie. he isn’t just lying to us).

He can justify his belief (eg. by referring to recent crime figures suggesting a downward trend).

It is actually true that crime rates will go down. (He can’t be said to have had knowledge if it turns out that crime rates are going up.)

Activity

According to the tripartite theory, what three conditions must be met for the statement ‘Scotland will win the next world cup’ to count as knowledge?
Problems with Justified True Belief

On the face of it the Tripartite theory looks quite good. Plato had insisted that in order to qualify as knowledge and not just as some kind of belief, we had to have satisfied the three conditions: we had to believe it, we had to have justification for what we believed, and it had to be actually true. However there are a number of examples where these conditions are not easily met.

Here is an example:
Jim is on holiday in America. When driving in the West he passes by towns that look like towns he has seen in films about the ‘Wild West’ and he thinks he is seeing genuine places that the films are based upon. In fact what he seeing in fake fronts raised by enterprising tourist companies to give a completely false impression, but as it happens as he drives along he also goes through a genuine ‘frontier’ town with genuine buildings. In this instance he is right to think of the town as a genuine ‘Wild West’ location. But is this justified, true belief?

There seems to be a problem with the evidence, the sensory-based information we have about the world that in effect undermines what we consider to be knowledge. In fact we can take that problem a step further. Sometimes when people are ill in one way or another they can find it difficult to understand the difference between what they thought or even dreamt happened, and what actually happened. What if we are all really in that position, what if everything we see, feel, hear and so on, is nothing more than a complicated form of dream? If we can be deceived by the senses, maybe we can also be deceived about what is real and what is not real by the ways in which our minds work?

In the film The Matrix the central character discovers that his ‘reality’ is in fact an elaborate programme run in a computer system and that the reality is that his body is being kept in a state of sleep by machines while the illusion of reality is fed into his brain. For most people subject to this process there is no escape, no way that they can tell that they are part of a computer program. What if that is true and the world about us is all a dream?