How do we know what we know? This question is central to the branch of philosophy called epistemology. Epistemology is the study of knowledge and related concepts, including belief, justification, certainty. It looks at the possibility and sources of knowledge. At its heart are two very important, very interesting questions about being human: How are human beings ‘hooked up’ to the world? And what ‘faculties’ do we have that enables us to gain knowledge?

In Unit 1.1 Reason and experience, two positions are discussed: that all of our ideas and concepts, and all of our knowledge, come from experience; and that we have ideas and knowledge that we have gained some other way, e.g. through reason or innately. This handout introduces some basic ideas and concepts that will help the discussion of these answers.

KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF

There are different types of knowledge: acquaintance knowledge (I know Oxford well), ability knowledge (I know how to ride a bike), and propositional knowledge (I know that eagles are birds). The first two types of knowledge are very interesting, but we are concerned only with the third, what it is to know some proposition, ‘p’. (A proposition is a declarative statement, or more accurately, what is expressed by a declarative statement, e.g. ‘eagles are birds’. Propositions can go after the phrases ‘I believe that…’ and ‘I know that…’.)

We intuitively make a distinction between belief and knowledge. People can believe propositions that aren’t true; but if you know that p, then p must be true. For example, if you claim that flamingoes are grey, and you think you know this, you are mistaken. If flamingoes are not grey, but pink, then you can’t know they are grey. Of course, you believe that they are grey; but that’s the difference – beliefs can be false. You can’t know something false; if it is false, then you don’t know it. You have made a mistake, believing it to be true when it is not.

There is another distinction between beliefs and knowledge. People can have true beliefs without having any evidence or justification for their beliefs. For example, someone on a jury might think that the person on trial is guilty just from the way they dress. Their belief, that the person is guilty, might be true; but how someone dresses isn’t evidence for whether they are a criminal! So belief can be accidentally true, relative to the evidence the person has; if it is, it isn’t knowledge. Someone can hold a belief that is, in fact, true, even when they have evidence to suggest it is false. For example, there is a lot of evidence that astrology does not make accurate predictions, and my horoscope has often been wrong. Suppose on one occasion, I read my horoscope and believe a prediction, although I know there is evidence against thinking it is right. And then this prediction turns out true! Did I know it was right? It looks more like my belief is irrational. I had no reason, no evidence, no justification, for believing that prediction was true. Knowledge, then,
needs some kind of support, some reason for thinking that the proposition believed is true. Knowledge needs to be justified.

TWO IMPORTANT CONTRASTS

Analytic/synthetic
The contrast between analytic and synthetic propositions is a contrast between types of proposition. A proposition is analytic if it is true or false just in virtue of the meanings of the words. Many analytic truths, such as ‘squares have four sides’, are obvious, but some are not, e.g. ‘In five days time, it will have been a week since the day which was tomorrow three days ago’ (think about it!). A proposition is synthetic if it is not analytic, i.e. it is true or false not just in virtue of the meanings of the words, but in virtue of the way the world is, e.g. ‘ripe tomatoes are red’.

A priori/a posteriori
This contrast is, in the first instance, about how we know whether a proposition is true. A priori knowledge is knowledge of propositions that do not require (sense) experience to be known to be true. An example is ‘Bachelors are unmarried’. If you understand what the proposition means, then you can see straight away that it must be true. You don’t need to find bachelors and ask them if they are married or not. Propositions that can only be established through experience are a posteriori. An example is ‘Snow is white’.

When applied to propositions, the a priori/a posteriori distinction is about how to check or establish knowledge. It is not a claim about how we acquire the concepts or words of the proposition. Babies are not born knowing that all bachelors are unmarried! Yet this is a truth that clearly doesn’t need testing against experience; we know it is true just by knowing what it means. Of course, we first have to learn what it means, but that is a different issue from how we check if it is true.

However, we can also apply the distinction to concepts. An a priori concept is one that cannot be derived from experience. Philosophers disagree about whether there are any such concepts.

Linking the contrasts
On first reflection, it might seem that the distinctions line up neatly: that a proposition that is analytic is also known a priori; and that a proposition that is synthetic is known a posteriori. ‘Bachelors are unmarried’ is not only known a priori, but is also analytic. ‘You are reading this book’ is synthetic and can only be known through sense experience. But is this alignment correct?

All analytic propositions are known a priori. Because they are true (or false) just in virtue of the meanings of the words, we don’t need to check them against sense experience to know whether or not they are true. However, just because all analytic propositions are a priori does not mean that all a priori propositions are analytic. Perhaps there are some a priori propositions that are synthetic. So we must ask whether all synthetic propositions are known a posteriori. Or do we have some knowledge, apart from knowledge of analytic truths, that does not come from sense experience?

This is the key question of this issue about reason and experience, one that philosophers disagree over. The disagreement forms the debate between ‘rationalism’ and ‘empiricism’.
The terms ‘rationalism’ and ‘empiricism’ have been used in different ways at different times, and sometimes quite misleadingly. They have been applied to theories of knowledge, theories of concept acquisition, theories of justification, and historical schools of thought. The main question that divides them is ‘what are the sources of knowledge? How do we acquire it?’. We can ask the question about our concepts as well – how do we get those? Rationalism gives an important role to reason, and empiricism to experience. But we may well wonder why we have to choose; in acquiring knowledge, don’t we use both reason and experience?

However, there is a clear way of marking the difference between rationalism and empiricism, which has become common in philosophy. The distinctions we drew above help us: Rationalism claims that we can have synthetic a priori knowledge of how the world is outside the mind. Empiricism denies this.

In other words, rationalists argue that it is possible for us to know (some) synthetic propositions about the world outside our own minds, e.g. about mathematics, morality, or even the physical world, without relying on sense experience. Empiricists argue that it is not.

Notice that most empiricists don’t deny *all* a priori knowledge – you don’t have to check whether all bachelors are unmarried to see if it is true! They simply claim that all a priori knowledge is of analytic propositions. If we don’t know if a proposition is true or false just by the meaning of the words, we *have* to use sense experience to find out whether it is true or false.

(The clause ‘how things are outside the mind’ is necessary. Many propositions about my mental states are synthetic, e.g. ‘I feel sad’ or ‘I am thinking about unicorns’. But they don’t require sense experience to be known; in fact, does knowing my own thoughts involve experiencing them at all? We don’t need to worry about this. Rationalists and empiricists alike accept that we *just do* know that we have certain impressions and ideas, thoughts and feelings. The argument is about knowledge of things other than our own minds.)

An obvious advantage of empiricism is that we can quickly understand the sources of knowledge. We gain knowledge through our senses by perceiving how the world is, which is a causal process. This is also how we form our concepts, from experience. Once we have acquired concepts, our understanding of them gives us analytic knowledge.

An important challenge to rationalism is: if we have knowledge which comes not from sense experience, and not just from the meanings of words, how do we gain this knowledge? Where does it come from? Rationalists argue either that we have a form of rational ‘intuition’ or ‘insight’ which enables us to grasp certain truths intellectually; or we know certain truths innately, as part of our rational nature; or both. They may also argue that some – or even all – of our concepts are innate or come from rational insight.