

Epistemology and the Roots of War

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Epistemology

From a very abstract perspective, one of the major divisions or areas of philosophy is known as “epistemology”, or the study of methods used to distinguish Truth (correspondence with Reality) from non-Truth.

From another tack: an epistemology is a body of answers to the question “How do I know?” It will contain, in general, theory (such as the criteria of logic or dictums of an historical text) and processes (such as experimental or ritual procedures) which are considered necessary to asserting any legitimate claim to truth of a result or conclusion.

Historically, various epistemologies polarize into two basic types:

- 1) The mystic, or subjective, position, which claims knowledge on the grounds of personal revelation, emotional “comfort”, or some exceptional (from the standpoint of human experience in general) connection to a broader, more universal source of wisdom and/or power.
- 2) The rationalist, or objective, position, which claims knowledge on the grounds of impersonal, reproducible observation and measurement. The tests of validity and truth must be accessible to anyone who wishes to perform them, must not depend essentially on the special talents of any one person or a secret body of knowledge, and must be open to modification as new knowledge demands.

Religions, universally, are mystical positions, with the added criteria that the broader source of wisdom is some super being called God, or Allah, or Yahweh, etc. Note, however, that it is possible to take an atheistic position that is still mystical. In this case the source of wisdom is “connection” with a universal “life force”, “pure spirit” entity, or the like which is not necessarily all powerful, all knowing, etc., but is nonetheless accessible only

to an elite group or authority with superior capability. The connection to this external entity always involves an emotional state or awareness, even if some appeal is made to concrete, physical apparatus or documentation as well. Some eastern belief systems (loosely called religions because of the mystical features held in common with same) are examples of atheistic mysticism.

Rational systems, on the other hand, are based on identifying the relations between real, material things, both living and in-animate, using physical senses such as sight, sound, taste, touch, sense-of-balance, and their extensions in the form of instruments like tape measures, electric meters, balances, and so on. Emotions are considered as guides at best, and are to be discounted if they lead to conclusions that contradict objective measurements and criteria. In some cases, such as doubly blind medical studies, precautions are taken specifically to prevent emotional influence on the results. What is now called “Science” is an example of a rational system.

As an aside here: mystical systems usually see emotions as “senses” for objective “spiritual” phenomena, analogous to the physical senses in that they respond to things originating outside the organism in a direct or primary way. Rational systems, on the other hand, see emotions as indirect, internal, subjective, responses to information provided by the physical senses, interpreted in the context of personal historical experience (and, perhaps, primary genetic structure).

Thus we see that there is a fundamental, and irresolvable, conflict between the mystic and rational camps. Mysticism considers subjective emotional experience as having the highest reliability, overriding objective information if they come into conflict. Rationalism considers subjective, emotional experience lowest in reliability, to be over-ridden by virtually any conflicting, objective, external criteria within the epistemological system.

A mystic’s position, based on their epistemology, is unassailable. Because the claims rest on private, non-shareable, subjective experience, opposition can be subordinated by the mystic at will, on the basis of their claim to superior ability to connect with the wiser “authority” (perhaps themselves). In reality their claims can be true. They can also be false. But any possibility of distinguishing truth from non-truth by anyone without comparable mystical insight is ruled out in principle by the basic mystic position. Mysticism

implies a hierarchical ranking of human authority, with the mystic in the superior position, and truth is defined to be what the authoritative mystic believes.

On the other hand, a rationalist position can be tested by anyone who understands the theory (as distinct from understanding and agreeing with it). If it is true others will be able to witness the basis for a claim. If a claim is false, others will be able to provide contradictory evidence, or demonstrate an error. In either case the dispute is resolvable for both parties, by either, on equal grounds. If the basic situation is inaccessible (such as the questions of alien visitations or ghosts, where no control over potential errors of observation and interpretation is possible) the claim must be regarded as an hypothesis (hypothesis means, literally, “under” thesis, or one with unverified credibility). The probability of truth is then based on the quality of the evidence. (In particular, anecdotal evidence and ancient texts are generally regarded as unreliable, and subject to interpretation errors, at best). In regard to ranking of human authority, rationalists, implicitly, are egalitarian rather than authoritarian. What matters to both parties in a dispute is what impersonal evidence supports, not who supports it.

Given this fundamental, irresolvable, conflict it should be apparent that no dispute over knowledge claimed on a given epistemology can be resolved through discussion unless both disputants agree on the tests of knowledge. If one party is a mystic and the other a rationalist, no agreement is possible over any issue that rests fundamentally on this decision about the priority, validity, and relevance of emotional experience. If both parties are mystics the dispute moves to the question of whose experience, or source of authority, should prevail.

The Roots of War

The issue is not one of mere “academic” interest. Consider, for example, the question “What actually happens when a mystical system collides with another (mystical or rationalist)?”

The proponents in each mystical system involved are absolutely convinced of the truth of the documentary source of their belief, or authority’s dictums. They agree on the validity of mystical epistemology and priority of mystical belief over objective evidence. But they are fundamentally opposed in

regard to what document, or authority, or process is considered the ultimate guide to ethical behaviour in the event of conflict.

How can differences be resolved? No mystic is willing to abandon their beliefs in favour of their “opponent”. After all, **their** authority is the infallible source of Truth. Each believes the only legitimate solution to the conflict is for the other to subordinate to the superior wisdom of their belief system. If the other side won’t yield **the only way out is use of power, ultimately war**, the use being perceived as **just** by **both** sides. In reality mystics are simply defending their belief system and cultural power, and Truth by any objective standard is irrelevant.

It is not difficult to find many contemporary and historical examples. All one need do is look for the boundaries of belief systems, where the conflicts are most apparent and critical. Indeed, I am hard pressed to recall any example where the mechanism described isn’t at the root of the conflict.

From a rationalist standpoint the situation is impossible to resolve. Unless, and until, all significant mystical systems admit their own fallibility, and abandon the intransigence of their mystical epistemology, the human race is doomed to perpetual war. The irony is that responsibility for the continuation of conflict is assignable to the very systems that are supposed to be responsible for promoting ethical behaviour.

Possible? Yes. Probable? No. How strong is your hope?