Lecture 1: The strange divergence between intuitive and reflective knowledge attribution

1. Q: Is knowledge itself easily known?
This could be understood as a question about whether particular instances of knowledge are easily recognized as such, or as a question about whether the general nature of knowledge itself is easily recognized (or known). In both senses, there is a strong case to be made for a positive answer. Oddly, there is also a strong case to be made for a negative answer. The instability here points to something strange in our natural capacity to detect knowledge. This series of lectures takes a fresh look at that capacity, and then at knowledge itself.

2. Ancient philosophical motivation
Background: The Nyāya-sūtra consists in a series of 528 philosophical observations or sūtras, transmitted in oral tradition for centuries, written down by the time of commentator Vātsyāyana (c.450), well after the sūtra-maker Gautama’s initial composition (the timing of which is unclear, perhaps c.150-200 CE, perhaps much earlier). Quotations here are from Matthew Dasti and Stephen Phillips’s translation, *The Nyāya-sūtra: Selections with Early Commentaries*, Hackett 2017 (NS).

Knowledge is defined as “veridical cognition produced in the right way” (Vātsyāyana) (NS p.14).
1.1.3. “The knowledge sources [pramāṇas] are perception, inference, analogy, and testimony” (NS p.17).
1.1.4 “Perceptual knowledge arises from a connection of sense faculty and object, does not depend on language, is inerrant, and is definitive.” (NS p.20)
(Vātsyāyana) “During the summer, the sun rays and the warmth radiating from the hot ground pulsate together and come into sensory connection with the visual organ of a person situated at a distance. In such a situation, the cognition ‘Water’ arises for the observer owing to the connection between his sense organ and the object. So to exclude such false cognition from the definition of perception proper, the author of the sūtras includes the qualifier ‘inerrant’. Perception, which is inerrant, cognizes something as it truly is, undeviating from what is true.” (NS p.23)
When efforts at reasoning go astray, according to Vātsyāyana, “It is not the case that there is an inference that deviates. Rather, there has been no inference at all—this is erroneously considered an inference” (Nyāya-bhāṣya 2.1.38; as quoted in Dasti, M., & Phillips, S. H. (2010). Pramana Are Factive: A Response to Jonardon Ganeri. *Philosophy East and West*, 60(4), 535-540, p.538).
1.1.7 “Testimony is instruction by a trustworthy authority.” (NS p.35)
(Vātsyāyana) “A trustworthy authority is someone who knows something directly, an instructor with the desire to communicate it faithfully as it is known.” (NS p.35)
2.1.16 “And knowledge sources may be objects of knowledge, like a measuring scale.” (NS p.53)
(Vātsyāyana) “perception and the rest are sources of knowledge insofar as they are causes of knowledge, and they are objects of knowledge insofar as they are the content of knowledge. Moreover, that they are commonly known as such is illustrated by statements such as, ‘It is by perception that I know it,’ ‘It is by inference that I know it’ (…), and ‘My knowledge is perceptual’ (…) ‘My knowledge is testimonial.’ Then they are grasped in individual instances.” (NS p.53)
(Vātsyāyana) “Furthermore, we understand them in specific ways through technical analyses, like the definition of perceptual knowledge [1.1.4]: ‘knowledge that arises from a connection of a sense faculty with an object’.”
2.1.17 (Objector) “On the view (a) that knowledge sources are themselves established by knowledge sources, the unwanted consequence would be that still other knowledge sources would have to be proved.” (NS p.54)
2.1.18 (Objector) “Or if we say (b) one pramāna need not be established by another, then, in the same way, we should accept objects without reasons.” (NS p.54)
2.1.19 (Answer) “No, pramāṇas are established like the light of a lamp.” (NS p.54)
(Vātsyāyana) “For example, the light of a lamp can be a knowledge source as part of the process of perception when something visible is apprehended by sight, while it itself would be known through another instance of perception through its connection with the visual organ.” (NS pp.54-5)
2.1.20 “Sometimes we find that no further source is required, while sometimes we find that another source is required. There is no fixed rule.” (NS p.56)

3. Knowledge is easily known


English-speaking children (ages 2-5) hear the verb “to know” 17 times in an average conversation, and use it themselves in one out every 30 utterances: Dudley, R., Rowe, M., Hacquard, V., & Lidz, J. (2017). Discovering the factivity of “know”. Semantics and Linguistic Theory 27, 600-619.


Factive attitudes (knowing that $p$, realizing that $p$, recognizing that $p$, being aware that $p$, seeing that $p$, etc.) are necessarily restricted to true complements; nonfactive attitudes (believing that $p$, suspecting that $p$, feeling sure that $p$, being confident that $p$, hoping that $p$, etc.) range over true and false complements. Knowing is the most general factive mental state: Williamson, T. (2000). Knowledge and its Limits. Oxford University Press.


It is controversial which Sanskrit author first recognized what we will call ‘Gettier cases’: Ganeri, J. (2007). The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of self and practices of truth in Indian ethics and epistemology. Oxford University Press.


4. Knowledge is hard to know

Aristotle: “For as the eyes of bats are to the blaze of day, so is the reason in our soul to the things which are by nature most evident of all.” (Metaph. 2.1, trans. W. D. Ross).


If you mention that clocks are sometimes stopped, the person glancing at a working clock is no longer seen as knowing: Nagel, J., San Juan, V., & Mar, R. (2013). Cognition, 129(3), 652-661.


5. The path forward