# Chapter 9
# Knowledge from a Human Point of View


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**Abstract** Everything that is known by human beings is known from a human point of view. There is no other point of view from which human beings can know anything. Is there something distinctively "perspectival" about human knowledge or the study of human knowledge? Explaining how such-and-such has come to be known by human beings involves explaining how those who know it came to get things right. Those who explain that knowledge are thereby committed to the truth of what is said to be known. Can we explain, from a human point of view, how it has come to be known that such-and-such is so in the world we live in? Or can we explain, from a human point of view, only how it has come to be known that such-and-such is so from a human point of view in the world we live in?

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I am intrigued by the phrase "knowledge from a human point of view". It raises delicate questions. Human beings have known many things about the world for a long time. And we continue to learn more and more every day. And whatever we human beings come to know is of course known from a human point of view. There is no other point of view from which human beings could know anything. So one way to understand the phrase "knowledge from a human point of view" is to take it simply to refer to human knowledge: everything human beings know. That amounts by now to a huge and truly impressive body of knowledge. Of course, that body of knowledge constantly changes, as new things are learned and others are abandoned as not true and so never known. We can speak more cautiously of what is known by human beings at a certain time, or during a certain period. And of course that can change too.

But the phrase "knowledge from a human point of view" also speaks of a way of knowing things: from "the human point of view" through which the knowledge is gained. That "point of view" is obviously not simply a position in space and time:

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the total region of the universe occupied at some time by human beings, for instance. "Knowledge from a human point of view" presumably means knowledge gained by human means: through the exercise of distinctively human sensory and intellectual capacities. In asking how human beings know things by those means we are asking in effect how, given what human beings are like, and what the world they live in is like, human beings have come to know the things they know. The question is completely general, not only about institutionally-organized knowledge in the form of sciences. Science is part of it, of course, but the question is how human beings, with their needs and desires, their natural talents, common sense, rituals and lore, languages, interests, traditions, institutions, and practices come to know all the things they know. How has all the knowledge we think there is in the world come to be?

We know at least that it has all been acquired "from a human point of view". And, being human, we ask the question ourselves, unavoidably, from "a human point of view". Since human knowledge is what is in question, part of the knowledge each of us is interested in is our own knowledge. Each of us is asking, "from a human point of view", how each of us knows the things we know "from a human point of view". Can we really get a satisfactory understanding of human knowledge in that way? We can seem to be presented with a puzzle because each of us is at the same time both the subject and the object of our investigation. It is we, as agents, who want to understand how certain inhabitants of the world – we human beings – know the things we know about the world "from a human, viz. our, point of view".

Is this really a special difficulty? What exactly do we want to understand in this way? Do we expect to understand how human beings know, admittedly from a human point of view, what is so in the world they live in? Or is the most we can expect to understand only how human beings can know, from a human point of view, what is so from a human point of view in the world they live in? These sound like different goals, and different possible achievements. Which do we seek? Which do we expect? Which is better? Given that whatever we know we know from a human point of view, wouldn't we be left in a less satisfying, more restricted position if the most we could understand was only how human beings can know what is so from a human point of view in the world they live in, rather than understanding how human beings can know what is so in the world they live in?

On reflection, we might ask whether this apparently more restricted possibility even makes sense. What does it mean to say that something or other is so (or not) "from a certain point of view"? Not just that something is *believed* to be so or *known* to be so from a certain point of view, but that something *is so* (or not) from a certain point of view. Do we really understand how or what that could be? This is one delicate question raised by the phrase with which we began: does speaking of "knowledge from a human point of view" add any special dimension or difficulty to the problem of understanding human knowledge?

I wonder whether a worry along these lines might be part of what lies behind the appeal of "perspectivism", sometimes called "perspectivalism". I cannot say I am sure about exactly what that view is, or what it says, but I take perspectivism to be, very roughly, the idea that in investigating ourselves and our knowledge the most we are in a position to understand and explain – perhaps the most there is to under-

stand – is our own attitudes and point of view on ourselves and the world: our *taking* ourselves to know things about the world, or *regarding* ourselves as knowers of the world we take ourselves to know. I will come back later to the question of perspectivism.

It might look as if how human beings come to know the things they know about the world they live in is a pretty straightforward question about how certain things happen in the world, or how one part of the world affects another. On the one hand there is the way things are in the world in all their purely non-human, impersonal aspects. And on the other, there is the way human beings are, with their distinctive capacities, talents, and traditions. That human beings have those distinctive characteristics is of course just as much a fact of the world as facts not involving human beings. And human beings with those characteristics come to know things about the world they live in. So it looks as if explaining the presence of human knowledge in the world would be a matter of explaining how human beings who exercise their natural capacities and practices in interacting with the surrounding world come to know how things are in the world they interact with. On this view, human knowledge acquired from a human point of view would be intelligible as a natural phenomenon in the world we live in.

I think there is something right, or at least promising, in this idea, but as it stands I think it cannot give us an explanation of human knowledge of the kind we seek. What is promising is the possibility of explaining in historical or developmental terms how human beings have come to believe all the things they believe. There must be some explanations of how all that happened, after all, whether we can actually explain it or not. But explaining how people have come to believe the things they believe, even if the explanation is correct as far as it goes, is not the same as explaining how they know the things they know. Something's being believed, even by many people in many different circumstances for a long time, is not the same as its being known.

There is something distinctive, and apparently more demanding, in understanding knowledge —as I think the history of philosophy amply illustrates. One fundamental difference is that knowledge implies truth; if something is known, it is true. That does not hold for belief. If different bodies of belief cannot all be true together, then not all of them are bodies of knowledge. And whether a body of beliefs does amount to knowledge or not cannot be determined simply by explaining how the beliefs in question came to be accepted. So historical or developmental explanation of the origin of beliefs is not enough to explain human knowledge.

The fact that what is known must be true explains why human knowledge is cumulative. To arrive at something not previously known by steps known to be reliable from something already known, or by finding it explicable only on the assumption of things already known, is to come to know something new. It is to add to the body of human knowledge, not simply to one's body of beliefs. Human knowledge grows because it is built on what is already known and so true. We are getting to know more and more about what is so every day, not just getting more beliefs. Of course, there is no guarantee of success. If we do know things, it is because human

beings are successful in coming to know things. That is what looking at "knowledge from a human point of view" is meant to help us understand.

The fact that what is known must be true also helps explain what is a striking fact about human knowledge. Most of what comes to be common knowledge among human beings is learned from other people's knowing it, not by each person's reaching the same conclusion independently. This is important not only for the development of human knowledge, but for human life. There is just too much for each of us to know to do it all on our own; we simply couldn't get by without learning much of it from its being known by others and being available to us only in that way.

If what is known must be true, then if we come to believe that a certain person knows such-and-such, we too must acknowledge that what that person knows is true. We cannot stand apart and remain non-committal on the question of the truth of what we grant that other person knows. For the same reason, if we take seriously the idea of investigating human knowledge, and want to explain, even "from a human point of view", how human beings know certain things, we must agree that they do know those things, and therefore that the things they know are true. Of course, we might find that others do not really know certain things we thought they know, or even that they are not true. We would not then regard it as knowledge, not even "knowledge from a human point of view". But if we do take certain people to know certain things, and we ourselves are committed to the truth of what we take them to know, then to *explain* their knowledge we must explain their *knowing* what they know. That involves explaining not simply their believing it, or even their believing that they know it. It requires explaining their *getting it right*. That is what is distinctive of explaining knowledge. It is more demanding than explaining belief. It commits you to the truth of what you regard as known. It is more demanding even than explaining true belief. It commits you to explaining the knower's success in getting it right.

If I believe that a certain other person knows a certain thing, I believe that what that person knows is true. So I believe it and am prepared to act on it on the basis of my attributing knowledge of it to her. That does not yet mean that I myself know what I think that other person knows. It is not that easy to get to know something. We can think we know something when we don't: either it is not true, or we don't know it. If I were wrong in thinking that the other person knows what I think she knows, I would not know it either. But if I nonetheless believe it, and it is in fact true, then what I believe as a result of relying on her knowing it is true. In accepting it and acting on it, I have a true belief. That true belief might become widely enough shared by others even to be part of what is called "common knowledge". It would be true, and widely believed, even if it turns out that nobody in fact knows it. It would then not be part of human knowledge.

We accept something we believe to be known by others because we take ourselves to know or have good reason to believe that those others do know it. In accepting it we believe their grounds or reasons for claiming to know it are sound and adequate for knowing. That is how we learn things from scientific and historical books, for instance. We believe that the authors of the books know what they are talking about and know that what they say is true. In accepting what the books say

we implicitly make positive evaluations of the competence and judgement of the authors, and of the correctness of what they say in the case in question. Making sound judgements of the competence of others is essential to our recognizing them as knowing things, and so learning from them. Judgement of that kind is part of our very conception of human knowledge. Not our conception of what is known by those who know, but our conception of what it is for somebody to know something.

The kinds of capacities, judgements, and abilities we credit others with in ascribing knowledge to them are the same qualities we ourselves possess and exercise in knowing the things we know. We all gradually acquire such capacities by learning to speak and understand the things we and other people say. To know something we must be capable of understanding and endorsing thoughts that express what we know. Since what is known must be true, they must be thoughts of something or other's being so: predicational thoughts with a truth value. Endorsing such thoughts is a matter of judging or putting it forward that what they express is true. We must be, or eventually become, masters of the procedures and discriminations necessary for having such thoughts and judging some of them to be true, if we are to have even as much as a capacity for knowing the kinds of things human beings come to know.

This is a gradual learning process; we do not go from blankness to a full repertoire of understanding and knowledge overnight. The learning takes place in the very circumstances we are learning to think about and make judgements about. To show that we have that capacity we must show repeatedly in practice that we are good at recognizing when the things we think we understand are in fact true, or, as the case might be, not true. It is easiest to do this, to begin with, in simple observational circumstances, when the objects we claim to know about are right before us. By getting more and more of the things we think in those circumstances right we are gaining more and more of the conceptual resources needed for thinking and so knowing this or that to be so in the world. Even in the process of acquiring that capacity for knowledge we come to know things about the world. As our expertise as knowers grows, and more and more of the judgements we make are correct, our knowledge of the world is growing accordingly. We become masters of speech and thought, and acquire an elaborate, sensitive capacity for knowing things of many different kinds. But, of course, through it all we remain fallible human beings.

We do not do all this on our own, in isolation. It is only because there are common languages into which all of us are socialized that there is even such a thing as our meaning one thing rather than another by the sounds we utter or being understood by others to be saying such-and-such. A social practice is needed to provide us with a shared means of expressing ourselves and understanding one another. It is in those terms that we express what we all come to know about the world around us. We find ourselves, and must find ourselves, in a "human point of view" that is widely shared. Human knowledge, and the human thought and understanding that is required for it, is a social achievement. I think it is only from some such communal position — shall we say "from a human point of view" — that human beings come to understand one another and share the thoughts and judgements they must master

even to be capable of knowing the things they all know about the world around them.

I think this conception of "a human point of view" from which to survey human knowledge would not be congenial to perspectivism as I understand it. Anyone occupying such a "point of view" already knows, and must know, many things about what is so in the world. It is not a "point of view" one can take up or occupy independently of, or somehow "from outside", one's knowing many things about the world. It is not non-committal on the question of whether there is human knowledge, or on the question of how things actually are in the world. To occupy this kind of "human point of view" is to be fully engaged in the community of human knowers and so to be committed to the world's being the ways it is widely known to be. That is to believe the world to be a certain way – all those ways one takes the world to be known to be. So human beings investigating human knowledge from "a human point of view" like this would find the world they investigate to be very much as they know it to be, and they would find it to be populated by other human beings who for the most part know the world to be just the ways they themselves know it to be.

This is certainly one kind of "human point of view" from which we can be presented with the problem of knowledge with which we began: how do human beings come to know the things they know? What, then, is the attitude or "human point of view" a perspectivist takes towards the human knowledge he or she would account for? It seems it could not be the straightforward acceptance of human beings' knowing the things they know, and so accepting the truth of the things they know, as I have just described it. There is nothing distinctively perspectival in that, or in the conception of human knowledge that is involved in it. Does the perspectivist focus, rather, on something else: not directly on human knowledge as such, but on human beings' taking certain attitudes towards themselves and the world: their *regarding* themselves as enquirers or knowers, their *taking* themselves to know things about the world, and so their *taking* the world to be a certain way? We human beings do have such attitudes towards ourselves and others, and we can find those attitudes to be present when we consider human knowledge "from a human point of view". Are those the attitudes perspectivism concentrates on?

There has been a long tradition in philosophy of finding the idea of human knowledge in itself suspicious, problematic, maybe even an impossibility. What is knowledge, anyway? Can it be defined? Can we ever really know anything? Can we even understand how we know something? Since at least the time of Plato the distinctive demands of knowledge have seemed to present a special problem. Sceptics in antiquity thought they could get along in life —or would even be better off — without seeking knowledge at all. Simply "going along with appearances" was a path to tranquillity.

In later centuries, more was thought to be needed for serious science, and beliefs, hypotheses, and theories became central to the philosophical understanding of human knowledge. Justification, confirmation, or reasons for accepting beliefs or theories, was what mattered. Justified belief was the goal, especially with consensus about the strength of the reasons. It was widely assumed that all that had to be added

to a well-confirmed belief for it to be knowledge was that the justified belief be true. Alas, that has turned out not to be so. The idea of knowledge apparently cannot be explained as simply a combination of certain states of mind and states of affairs, each in itself less than knowledge. What, then, does knowledge amount to? Can it be defined at all? What role does the idea of knowledge actually play in the constant human effort to find out how things are in the world?

The most extreme reaction to difficulties in the idea of knowledge was present almost from the beginning: the sceptical conclusion that nobody can ever really know anything about the world around us. I think that view of the human condition is, as a simple matter of fact, not correct. I think there is no question that we all know a great many things, and that it is possible, in general, to explain how we know them. What I find most interesting, fascinating, and challenging about philosophical scepticism is not the flat-footed question whether it is true, or false, but what it really is, how it works, or how it is supposed to work.

I think there is a lot to be learned about ourselves and our thought about ourselves and the world by looking carefully into the conditions we can see to be necessary even for us to think of a world at all, and to understand ourselves as competently exercising the concepts we need in order to perceive and believe things about it. We could not even entertain the possibility of human knowledge if we did not fulfil those conditions. So, rather than flatly denying philosophical scepticism, or ignoring it, I think it is more fruitful to try to discover whether we could actually fulfil all those necessary conditions, and so whether we could even be presented with what looks like a general challenge to our knowledge of the world, if we did not also in fact (perhaps unrecognized by us at the moment) also know many things about that world, or at least take ourselves to know them. That would not show directly that philosophical scepticism is not true, but it might change our attitudes towards it. We might even come to see how and why that sceptical conclusion, for all its apparent force, is something we simply could never consistently accept, given that we possess what it takes even to understand it. Philosophical scepticism might then take on a different interest for us. If we did come to see and feel something like that, we could be said to have discovered it by reflecting on human knowledge "from a human point of view".

The tradition of looking askance at the concept of knowledge has not always gone as far as denying the very possibility of knowledge. Many have questioned whether we even need such a puzzling notion to account for the obvious success human beings have had in coping with the world and with one another in the ways they have. Could it be that perspectivism perhaps expresses a certain sympathy with this tradition of doubt or suspicion about knowledge? I speculate here, but the idea of knowledge is so directly connected with the idea of truth, which is independent of human beings' holding the attitudes they do towards it, that perhaps perspectivism sees more promise in shifting the focus away from the idea of knowledge as such, and looking instead to other human attitudes or responses involved in explaining what we want to understand about the whole enterprise of what we call human knowledge. I will end with one thought about this.

If this is a way to understand the appeal of perspectivism, I would suggest a line of thought in response to it parallel to my proposal about philosophical scepticism. First would be to ask what we primarily want to understand about the acquisition and development of what we call human knowledge. Is it human acceptance —and rejection — of more and more theories or hypotheses that we think needs accounting for? Or is it the fact of theory change, or the competition among theories: how can we tell which is best? Or is what we want to account for the progressive accumulation of more and more of what we call human knowledge: the reliable growth of an expanding conception of the world and of human life? And whatever the goal, can we really understand what we most want to understand about the enterprise of human knowledge by thinking of those who investigate the world as exercising only the concepts needed for the less-committal epistemic attitudes and responses that perspectivism concentrates on, not a concept of knowledge that implies truth and so apparently resists perspectival treatment?

This is a question I recommend to aspiring perspectivists. As I think I have found with philosophical scepticism, I think it promises, at the very least, a deeper understanding of the puzzles that confront us.