

**Philosophical Foundations
for
Liberal Democracy**

Roger Bishop Jones

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Contents

Preface	2
1 Introduction	2
2 Rationality	3
3 Some Kinds of Knowledge	4
4 Language	5
5 Logic	5
6 Metaphysics	5
7 Science	5
8 Scepticisms	5
9 Epistemologies	5
Index	5

Preface

1 Introduction

Where reason prevails liberal democracy may flourish. Homo sapiens, possibly the only species capable of reason, is, however, also liable to tribal ideology in which belief in absurdities is the litmus test of ideologic purity.

In default of discourse, force may prevail. Democracy is the choice to resolve differences at the political level without resort to force, and to provide a means (ultimately backed by a state monopoly over the use of force) for the resolution of differences between individuals and groups within the state, on the basis of a code of law.

Not so long ago, national, let alone global, media were in the hands of tiny elites, and paid little attention to the opinions of the man in the street, which they could hope to shape. In that context, ignorance of epistemological fundamentals and rational norms on the part of common folk might not have been so significant. Today, we have reason for greater concern that “narratives” may be pressed, public opinion may be swayed, and governments unseated, by activist rhetoric (from anywhere on the political spectrum) in the face of contrary evidence.

In my primary and secondary education, I have no recollection of any attempt to educate me in how to assess the credibility of such claims. Any ability to do so was acquired by osmosis rather than instruction.

In the contemporary concern over “fake news” the suggestion seems to be that one should judge the credibility of the source rather than probe the evidence. Those sources most likely to be supposed authoritative, mainstream media, have become increasingly partisan, to the point where one may reasonably doubt whether they even recognise a distinction between facts and opinion.

In the new proliferation of sources, it might be helpful to have clear articulation of fundamental principles belonging to epistemol-

ogy and the philosophy of language, logic and science together with exposure of the most common and egregious ways in which those principles may be flouted. It is a challenge to see such ideas presented for a broad audience, perhaps together with more detailed and nuanced expansions for those willing to dig a little deeper.

In this essay I'm mainly interested in putting together a story, rather than in curating a presentation which presumes no prior philosophical understanding (though that is where I think I ought to be heading).

It is a discussion of *foundations* and is therefore certain to be ultimately circular, but I hope, nonetheless informative. This particular circularity involves philosophy of language, of logic, and epistemology, and the concept of *rationality* with which I will begin.

2 Rationality

Like most words in the English language which have not been made precise by mathematics or science, the word *rationality* has diverse usage which thoroughly obscures the distinction between what is part of the *meaning* of the concept and what is part of our beliefs about what is rational.

For my present purposes I propose to offer a definition of the concept, which is intended to clarify its use in this essay, not to say anything about how it may have previously been used.

My usage is primarily *instrumental* and *normative*. A course of action may be said to have *instrumental rationality* if it is reasonable to suppose that it will realise the purpose for which it was undertaken. A belief has *epistemic rationality*, if the belief is held on good grounds, evidence which shows the belief to be most probably true. We may consider epistemic rationality to be instrumentally rational, insofar as holding true belief will enable the adoption of effective ways of realising our purposes.

3 Some Kinds of Knowledge

I will mostly be concerned with aspects of epistemology which are confined to communicable knowledge, but its necessary first to make that distinction.

To that end I suggest that knowledge can usefully be considered as falling into three principle types:

- knowledge by acquaintance (been there, seen that)
- knowing *how* (done it)
- knowing *that* (got the tea-shirt?)

Knowledge *by acquaintance* is that familiarity which comes from direct experience, having been there, having seen it, perhaps something you heard, or even knowing how something *feels*. Maybe some phenomenon you have witnessed, a process you have observed, a ritual or a dance.

Knowing *how* will usually be a skill acquired by watching and doing, perhaps something which does not really require any *skill* but just a knowledge of what to do acquired by seeing just the once, or trying and discovering. Sometimes, even in non-human primates, it may be a skill properly mastered only over an extended period of time (years even).

Knowledge by acquaintance and knowing how are both found across a broad swathe of the biosphere, sometimes as innate knowledge buried in genes, sometimes passed from parent to child, or among peers, by example and mimicry, sometimes discovered.

Knowledge *that* is special and will be the main focus of our attention in this essay. It appears only when we have descriptive language, in which *propositions*, the content of indicative sentences, can be expressed.

A distinctive feature of this kind of knowledge is that it can be transferred in the absence of the circumstances to which it relates, passed from generation to generation or across large physical distances. It makes possible an evolving oral culture propagated through story telling and singing. In a period of unusually volatile

climate change, geographical knowledge of where subsistence could be had in different climatic conditions would be valuable, social status would attach to the skills involved and the evolution of the physical and mental infrastructure for linguistic excellence would be accelerated by sexual selection on that basis. Such conditions did occur in the 600 thousand year period starting just 800 thousand years ago.

During that period typical size of homo sapiens brains grew by about 50% and then plateaued with the emergence of anatomically modern homo sapiens. The linguistic abilities marked the beginning of culture and its evolution, an evolution which accelerated throughout the following 200,000 years, in steps which corresponded often to advances in our technology for preserving, replicating and communicating bodies of knowledge.

4 Language

5 Logic

6 Metaphysics

7 Science

8 Skepticisms

9 Epistemologies

Index

knowing

 how, **4**

 that, **4**

knowledge, **4**

 by acquaintance, **4**

rationality, **3**

 epistemic, **3**

 instrumental, **3**