

hero—someone who has prevailed against the odds. But everything depends on this: Truman must come to a *knowledge of the truth*.

Our emotional engagement may divert our attention from the cognitive aspect of Truman's plight. We realize that Truman must discover the truth if he's to escape his bonds. But do we understand the real nature of his bonds? They're not purely social and psychological. They're also *epistemological*. In fact, they're most fundamentally epistemological.

## What Is Epistemology?

Epistemology is a branch of philosophy. The word *epistemology* comes from the Greek word *episteme*, meaning "knowledge." Epistemology is the study of knowledge. In epistemology, we seek knowledge about knowledge.

Clearly, we prize knowledge; knowledge matters to us. But why?

For starters, we care because knowledge has *instrumental* value for us. We use knowledge to navigate our way in the world. Knowledge keeps us alive when we think of crossing a busy street. It's what keeps us from becoming a bumper sticker on the front of a Mack truck. We count on knowledge to keep ourselves fit and healthy—and for innumerable other purposes.

We rely heavily on the knowledge of others. We can't know everything firsthand. Much of what we know is on the say-so of people around us. We trust people to know things that we don't know and can't know. For example, we depend on the expertise of dentists and surgeons, generals and elected officials, lawyers and judges, automobile manufacturers and airline pilots. For most of us, these are people whose knowledge serves and supports us in important ways. And we may have specialized knowledge that contributes to the well-being of others. Even if most of what we know is common knowledge, it's important to others that we have such knowledge. When I'm driving my car, it's not enough that I know the traffic laws, the meaning of the signage and the rules of etiquette. The other drivers I encounter had better know these things, too.

This suggests that *part of being responsible is having knowledge and acting on the basis of the knowledge we have*. It also suggests that our acquisition of knowledge should not be haphazard. There are certain things we feel we must know. There may also be things we would very much like to know, even if such knowledge is beyond our reach. But in many areas of life we're pretty good at getting knowledge when we need or want it.

We also prize knowledge for its *intrinsic* value; that is, we value knowledge for its own sake. This makes more sense when we unpack the concept of knowledge.

It isn't very controversial that knowledge includes *true belief*. And truth is intrinsically valuable. Truth is intrinsically valuable to someone who cares to know the truth even if the truth is inconvenient. It is valued intrinsically when it is desired, however unpleasant it may be and regardless of the burdens it places on the one who has the truth.

We prefer people who are truthful over people who are not, even if their character and their behavior have no direct bearing on our lives. Our disapproval is roused when we become aware of dishonest dealings between people, even when they remain perfect strangers to us—even, I should say, when the characters are fictional (or not "true to life"). This is further evidence of the intrinsic value truth has for us.

We also want our own existence to be "true." Nearly all of us so crave authenticity that we would not be willing to trade an authentic existence, even suffused with anguish and disappointment, for a contrived existence that is thoroughly artificial but relentlessly pleasurable. Our instincts are to favor reality over virtual reality as the fundamental framework of our lives. (Yes, we love fiction. But really great fiction illuminates the human condition and mirrors our experience in ways that enable us to see who we are and what we might become.)

True belief is not all there is to knowledge. To believe is to hold that some proposition or statement is true. The believer naturally thinks he has the truth, or he wouldn't believe. So if he believes when he might not, why does he? He may simply be caused to believe. But causes of belief don't generally give the believer anything to go on. A belief may be caused any number of ways and not be true or even most likely true. What the believer needs, if he would believe responsibly, is some indicator that what he believes is true.

Believing responsibly has double significance. First, it means to believe because there is some reason to think that what is believed is true. That is, the belief is *reasonable*. Second, it means to believe in ways that can be the basis for responsible action in the world. In other words, the belief is *actionable*. In both cases, the believer must possess the truth a certain way. He must have some means of getting in touch with the truth. This is the role of *evidence*.<sup>3</sup>

Knowledge, then, is true belief that is both reasonable and actionable be-