

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor of *Philosophy*

DEAR SIR,

The purpose of Dr. Burniston Brown's address, which appeared in the April 1953 issue of *Philosophy*, was to show that ambiguity in the meaning of the words *fact*, *real*, and *true* could be reduced by assigning definitions to them. I wish to draw attention to some confusions in the use of the word *know* that derive, in part, from these definitions.

Dr. Brown argues that the word *know* should be used only in connection with "events of consciousness." This is implied by the statement, which appears no less than six times in Dr. Brown's address, that "they (i.e. events of consciousness) are *all* that we ever know" (my italics). It follows that he regards the use of *know* in any other context as inappropriate. Dr. Brown commits himself, therefore, to the view that sentences like—

John knows his ten times table.
I know the professor here.
He knows how to get to Oxford Street,

employ the word *know* (*knows*) inappropriately. I use the word "inappropriate" because it is difficult to think of any other word that Dr. Brown might use to describe uses of the word *know* that are not concerned with "events of consciousness." But whether he would regard these uses of the word *know* as inappropriate or not, it is certain that the word may be used in these and in other ways without misunderstanding or confusion. Dr. Brown does speak of the need for not "denying . . . the accepted meaning of words" (p. 158). But this only adds to our difficulty in understanding his position. For "denying the accepted meaning of words" is just what is implied by the use of *know* that he advocates.

Further confusions about the meaning of the word *know* are caused by the connection it has, in Dr. Brown's address, with the phrase "to be conscious of" something. He says (pp. 154–5): "I am conscious of coloured patches . . . and sounds." And these, together with thoughts, feelings and other sensations "are all that we ever know." With this principle of epistemology in mind, we can turn to the long paragraph on page 155. If we regard the brain as a centre of great electrical energy, whose activity is modified by incoming stimuli, it follows, says Dr. Brown, that a "pure datum" is never known in consciousness. But "what we are conscious of is some integrating process." It is difficult to know what can be meant by this. If we are conscious of this process, then we ought to be able to say what it looks like, or feels like, or tastes like, for these are the sorts of sensations that Dr. Brown tells us that we are conscious of. But we cannot say such things about this integrating process. What we *are* conscious of are smells, tastes, and thoughts, not processes going on in the brain. If knowledge of these "integrating processes" were what "being conscious of" means, how is it that we have only just found this out? Haven't people been conscious of these "processes" before? As Mr. R. Rhees has remarked, if they are what we are conscious of, why did anyone need to tell us?

Although Dr. Brown advocates the use of *know* in reference to "events of consciousness" only, he nevertheless uses the word where no such reference is implied. He says, for instance, "propositions are only known to be true if they are verifiable." This implies that somebody knows something, and that what he knows is a proposition, not an event of consciousness. Or, again, in a footnote Dr. Brown says that "human knowledge is what human beings know—not what they don't know." Clearly what he understands by "what human beings know" is *not* what he has defined as all that we can know—events of consciousness. He is using the word *know* here in one of its ordinary senses. This is unobjectionable, but inconsistent with Dr. Brown's declared intention to employ the word differently. Then on page 155 he says, "Everyone knows that the eye does not see the cutting off of the light by the shutter of the cinema projector . . ." Here again is a familiar use of *knows* different from that advocated by Dr. Brown himself.

There always is a danger, when people try to give tidy definitions of commonly used words, that these words will be used in both their commonly accepted sense, and in the sense laid down by definition. Here is a source of confusion, not a solution to it. And this, it seems to me, has been amply demonstrated by Dr. Brown.

Yours, etc.,

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