Chapter Nine

On Our Beliefs
About the Cognitive Structure
of Contemporary Culture

One of the most important elements of our whole cultural tradition originates in Greece, in the early fifth century BC, when Parmenides drew a fundamental distinction between episteme and doxa, between the Way of Truth or Knowledge and that of Opinion or mere Belief. This is, in a sense, the foundational act of philosophy as a specific cultural enterprise, but also more generally that of rational critical inquiry, the self-reflexivity of which is a basic characteristic of our culture. It meant a fundamental break with what is often referred to as “poetic scepticism,” embedded in the great epic tradition that certainly was more in accord with popular imagination. According to this latter, true knowledge is the sacred possession of the gods, and it never can be acquired by unaided human effort. The claim that at least some, however exceptional human beings, the philosophers, can reach, solely by the appropriate use of their own capacities, that is reason (in some broad sense) this very end is one of the most important elements of the legacy of Greek antiquity for our culture. All the more
so, because this true knowledge was conceived as having not only theoretical, but simultaneously also decisive practical import.

The distinction drawn between knowledge and belief is, of course, not merely a matter of philosophy. Though a matter of reflection, it is for us enshrined in the everyday language and fundamentally orients our cognitive activities. It presents a way we need to and do reflect upon what we quite ordinarily and unreflectively do: making assertions which others either accept as reasons for further assertions or actions, or challenge making us to give reasons for them. In this sense it concerns and orients the living give-and-take of human communication today in which the status of what is said is not necessarily settled beforehand and is not unquestionably determined by the status, charisma or other personal qualities of the individual who makes the statement concerned.

What do we mean then by “knowledge”? According to a tradition, which is usually traced back to Plato’s *Meno* (no doubt, rather badly simplifying his views), but widely accepted and repeated in the relevant literature on the subject also today, knowledge is justified true belief. Let us depart from this understanding.

At first glance it may appear that this view is not in accord with how we ordinarily use the term to “know.” I myself, for example, would maintain: I know that Madrid is in Spain, though I never visited this country, and similarly I know that the velocity of light in vacuum equals 300,000 kilometres per second. Were I challenged in respect of these claims, I certainly would be in trouble, for I could not provide justification for them in the sense of adequate empirical grounds or supports. In the improbable case that I were really pressed on these points, at best I could refer my interlocutor to a recent map of the world or indicate that they should consult a textbook of physics. This “at best” is, however, also “good enough.” In fact, in most of the cases when I actually claim to know, I am incapable of offering elaborate cognitive justifications for my claims – instead I would indicate for them *authorising instances* generally regarded as valid in our culture.

This practice throws an important light on the very concept of knowledge. When I claim to know that this and this is so and so, I claim an *authority* of specific kind. Its character can be clarified through a suitable explication of the classical tripartite conception of knowledge as justified true belief.