

Comparing Belief and Knowledge

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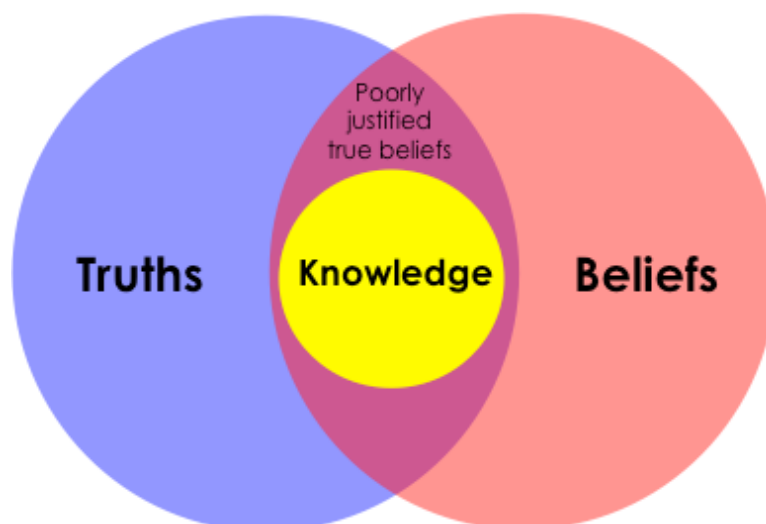
“On what grounds can belief and knowledge be compared?”¹

In order to explore the above epistemological question comparing belief and knowledge, I was motivated to write this essay based on an interesting film that I watched over the recent Eton long leave, entitled, *Franklyn*.²

Franklyn can be seen as a modern-day retelling of Plato's allegory of the cave in his *Republic*,³ in which a prisoner, locked in a belief-based world of shadows escapes to find knowledge of the true reality. The film tackles belief from both a “belief in” perspective associated with theology, as well as from a “belief that” perspective associated with epistemology.

Knowledge as Justified True Belief

Plato also helped to develop the classical notion of knowledge as “justified true belief” in his dialogues in *Theaetetus*.⁴ As demonstrated in the diagram below, knowledge lies at the intersection of truth and beliefs which are justified (yellow circle).



¹ 2017 A.J. Ayer Philosophy Prize essay question 4.

² *Franklyn*, Gerald McMorrow (2008).

³ Plato, *Republic*.

⁴ Plato, *Theaetetus*.

Franklyn (2008)

In a dystopian world called “Meanwhile City”, where religious belief is mandatory, a masked vigilante atheist, named Jonathan Preest, seeks revenge against a dangerous religious leader known as “the Individual”, who was responsible for the death of an innocent young girl.

*“Somebody once said that religion was deemed by the commoners as true,
by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful.
The only thing I believe is that my name is Jonathan Preest.
And tonight, I'm gonna kill a man.”⁵*



Meanwhile in London, three random, disconnected lost souls are each struggling to find themselves by trying to resolve their deep life-problems:

Emilia is a depressed young art student who films her suicide attempts in order to seek the attention of her distant mother.

Milo is a heartbroken young man whose fiancé left him at the altar, and he seeks to find the only girl he could count on, his long-lost childhood true love, Sally.

Peter is a religious church warden, who is searching for his son, a war veteran, who has gone missing after returning from duty.

A seemingly minor character, a janitor named Pastor Bone, is the only person who randomly meets with and mysteriously connects each of these lost souls.

⁵ *Franklyn* (2008). Jonathan Preest (actor: Ryan Phillippe).

As the film unfolds, we learn that Jonathan Preest is actually Peter's lost son, David, who has returned to London traumatised by war and suffers delusions: he has created the parallel reality of "Meanwhile City", where he believes he is a vigilante. While David was away at war, his younger sister died. While his father, Peter, said this was God's will, David, the atheist, blames his father for his sister's death; he identifies Peter as "the Individual" in "Meanwhile City" and wants to kill him.

*"If a god is willing to prevent evil, but not able, then he is not omnipotent.
If he is able, but not willing, then he must be malevolent.
If he is neither able or willing then why call him a god?
Why else do bad things happen to good people?"⁶*

We also learn that Milo's childhood sweetheart never existed and only existed in his mind (his own "Meanwhile City"). She was initially invented by Milo when he was a boy to cope with the death of his father, and she now "returned" to help Milo cope with his failed marriage attempt. Milo believes that he has an upcoming date with his childhood sweetheart at a café.

We also learn that Emilia had been abused by her father when she was young, and that contrary to what she believed, her mother had taken her away to protect her from him. We realise that she uses art to construct a different reality which calls for attention.

The four main characters then randomly converge in a dramatic final scene:

Peter learns that David is staying in a flat owned by a mysterious unknown person named Franklyn (the name of the movie), and goes there to see his son. David/Preest is waiting in the flat for Peter/"the Individual" with a rifle.

When Peter rings the doorbell to Franklyn's flat, a random wiring fault instead reaches an adjacent flat, where Emilia coincidentally lives. Peter tells Emilia that he would wait across the street in a café for David – the same café that Milo is coincidentally waiting for his childhood sweetheart.

When David/Preest learns that his plan to kill Peter/"the Individual" has been ruined, he bursts into Emilia's flat and shoots through the window at Peter/"the Individual" in the café below, but Milo accidentally (but not mortally) gets shot instead, saving Peter.

At that moment, David/Preest realises that the parallel world of "Meanwhile City" that he believed in does not exist and that his father is not "the Individual". As an atheist, his lack of belief in fate has been shattered. He decides to take his own life by blowing-up the flat, but first saves Emilia's life by instructing her to run out of the building, where she flees and meets a wounded Milo and they end up together, having found each other. Although David could not save his sister's life, he serendipitously helps save Emilia's by giving her something/someone to live for, Milio.

⁶ Franklyn (2008). Jonathan Preest (actor: Ryan Phillippe).

Belief and Knowledge in Franklyn

Franklyn shows the pervasiveness of belief because each character believes in their own versions of their stories (Emelia's versus her mother's; David's versus Peter's) and even in different realities (David's "Meanwhile City", Milo's invented sweetheart, Emilia's art and possibly Peter's God).

"Anywhere can feel like a prison, when you don't have any faith."⁷

"You see, without faith, it's difficult to be controlled."⁸

*"When you're lost, you're willing to believe anything.
In this city, every religion promised a future, whether in this world or the next.
All you had to pay them with was your faith and trust."⁹*

On the one hand, David/Preest criticises belief, which seems to be a commodity in "Meanwhile City": everyone must have a belief – no matter in what - and atheists are not allowed because *belief in something* helps to keep the society cohesive. On the other hand, we see that David/Preest *believes in* "Meanwhile City" which is not real but a construct of his imagination. So is it possible for any character to reach true knowledge at all? Is knowledge the thing that all characters share at the end because they see reality in the face? David/Preest realises that his father is not "the Individual", Emilia realises that her mother did protect her, that death is not glamorous and that she wants to live. Milo realises that his friend does not exist but that he can go on without her. Peter finds his son and possibly understands what happened to him. They all end up sharing the same bits of reality and have shared knowledge of it.

Pastor Bone is the only character in London who is really different from the others, and he can be seen as a messianic or divine figure, who lives in the world of truth, not beliefs. In this way, he guides the others toward knowledge, in helping them arrive at their own *justified true beliefs*.

"My name is Pastor Bone. It means 'bread of life'. "¹⁰

Throughout the movie, the viewers struggle to understand what is real (what their knowledge of the story is) and what is not (what they first believed about the characters and their stories). They end up constructing their knowledge by piecing all the puzzle bits together, abandoning their first beliefs about the story (as the characters abandon theirs) and reconstructing the story into something that can be *justified* and makes sense. So the viewers' knowledge of the movie is shared justified belief.

"If you believe in something strongly enough, who's to say if it's real or not?"¹¹

⁷ *Franklyn* (2008). Jonathan Preest (actor: Ryan Phillippe).

⁸ *Franklyn* (2008). Jonathan Preest (actor: Ryan Phillippe).

⁹ *Franklyn* (2008). Jonathan Preest (actor: Ryan Phillippe).

¹⁰ *Franklyn* (2008). Pastor Bone (actor: James Faulkner) to Peter (actor: Bernard Hill).

¹¹ *Franklyn* (2008). Sally (actor: Eva Green).

In this way, *Franklyn* can be seen as a modern-day retelling of Plato's allegory of the cave, in which belief and knowledge battled for supremacy as the "truths" of modern-day London cast their ghostly shadow, creating the beliefs of "Meanwhile City".



Word Count

1,135 words, excluding quotations, footnotes, bibliography and acknowledgements.

Bibliography / References

Franklyn, written and directed by Gerald McMorrow, (2008).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08Nj6a8U2uk>,

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franklyn>.

Plato, *Republic*.

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