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KNOWLEDGE, REASON AND REALITY, ASS 1
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Essay: Is there any point in trying to define 'knowledge'? Which of the
various definitions you have come across do you find the most cogent?

Abstract

This essay will explain why people pursue knowledge and need to pinpoint the definition of knowledge. Additionally, different theories of knowledge will be presented in the essay and at the end of the essay, the writer will choose a theory that most appeals to them. The essay is divided into three sections. The introduction focuses on knowing what 'knowledge' is and explains why there is a need to 'know'. The second part focuses on various epistemological theories and how knowledge is derived. The conclusion will focus answering the essay question of why "there is any point in trying to define 'knowledge' and the writer will provide the theory they find most cogent.

Keywords: *Descartes, epistemology, Unger, Knowledge, Moore, Plato*

Seeking knowledge is a basic human enterprise that comes from the earliest moments of life. The human species has an insatiable desire to know and that is evident in children, who always ask-why. While scientists cogitate on the 'how' questions, philosophers ponder on the 'why'. For philosophers to whom the world never grows old, and children to whom the world is so new, live in wonder. Knowledge in definition can be very hard to define. Nonetheless, knowledge seems to be derived from exploring questions of 'why'. A simple answer would be "it is natural" or "we are a curious species". A study by Kang provides an example how curiosity is a similar drive to hunger. The researchers looked at brain scans of human beings to see if curiosity for knowledge activates the same way food does for hunger. Trivia was given to subject experiments while the answers was withheld as their brain activity was observed. What was found was that when participants were asked questions, parts of the brain that anticipate reward were activated. In the same manner, hunger activates reward participation in parts of the brain when food is expected (Min et al., 2009, p. 963-964). Perhaps, biologically humans are curious, while metaphysics can provide answers, but not concrete enough for everyone to agree on. The best answer as to why people ask 'why' is simply, they do.

Truth and knowledge are categories of epistemology that are debated throughout. This essay will not discuss these major differences, however, a close comparison of a general elucidation will be clarified for the readers ahead. In epistemology the goal criteria is to have methods that brings us into knowledge which would include facts, information and data. Whether those information, data and facts are true or not is determined by the criteria to know them - or in their methodology. Therefore, creating a methodology to know those facts becomes important. If the data is true, then it has the possibility of truth. For truth to become apparent, two conditions can be applied: first, if the information is checked by several methodologies and it provides the same

outcome, it is considered to be the truth. Second, if it can be agreed upon by several entities (humans, groups etc...), then it can also be considered to be the truth (Truncellito, 2020). For example, most people would agree to that a triangle can be defined as a shape that has three sides - and therefore, this would be considered the truth.

Classification of knowledge becomes important for 'knowing' to know how learning occurs. How does knowledge come about can be used to categorize it into various types, including: innate knowledge, observational knowledge, knowledge by purely thinking and knowledge by thinking and observing.

Innate knowledge is the type of knowledge that is found within the person themselves. A good example of such argument is the ability to do basic arithmetic or simple logic principles. Other examples such as space and time, being aware in space and time is innate (Stewart-williams, 2005, p. 792-793). In some cases, it is argued that language is innate too (Chomsky, et al., 2002, p. 62 & 74-81). It is difficult to conclude whether knowledge is innate or not, but at times when people acquire knowledge without any effort, they can believe that it is innate. The philosophical question whether knowledge just exists and is dormant is yet to be answered, but many people feel they understand things but cannot describe (Hetherington, 2020).

Observational knowledge involves abstract thinking which may not be considered knowledge. For instance, is recognizing that an animal is asleep acquiring knowledge or the occurrence of an observation? Additionally, observation has taken akin for empiricism in modern times to be major method for today's science (Bogen, 2009). Nonetheless, observational knowledge does beg the question, how long should it take to observe a concept or an entity for to be considered an acquired knowledge? The standard for observational knowledge is not available, yet, most people would observe many things and recall it being part of their knowledge (Hetherington,

2020). Famously, David Hume is considered an empiricist since he argues that there is no self and that only thing he finds in himself are emotions and sensations, and since the Self cannot be observed it cannot exist (Hume, 1739, p. 131).

Knowledge by purely thinking or rationality is the third classification of knowledge. People who consider knowledge to be only of this type are called rationalists. In this classification, knowledge is considered a *priori* and requires thinking to be as an achievement. Famously, Descartes is considered by others to be a rationalist since he argues for the existence of God on a rational argument (Dicker, 2013, p. 19). Some argue that knowledge is innate and rationality allows the extraction. An example is addition and subtraction. It has shown uneducated people are able to put two sticks with two other sticks and show the result as four sticks. Even though they did not learn ' $2+2=4$ ' through formal schooling, it is argued, that their rationality allowed them to conceive such knowledge (Hetherington, 2020). But the problem with rationality to be considered the only source of knowledge is also fallible. For instance, we cannot rationally conceive light but require an observation in order to conceive it.

The last classification is thinking with observation. Most philosophers and thinkers would agree some knowledge might perhaps come rationally only and some knowledge does require observation. However, as most would observe a phenomenon, process what is observed and apply rationality to make a result or outcome from the data received (Hetherington, 2020).

And even when knowledge is classified into their respective labels, it does not answer why do individuals want to 'know'. Some might argue it is the nature of human beings to be curious. However, even though people are curious, people's reasons to pursue 'knowledge' varies. Therefore, reasons for knowing can vary. Some reasons include: value of knowledge in itself.

Virtue Epistemology (virtue in knowledge), usefulness (practical use), assertions (used in law and philosophy) and reliable informant (to help others).

For knowledge to be useful in itself should have intrinsic value. Therefore, once it is asked why a person wants to know, the answer is that the act of having acquired valuable knowledge, by itself, is capable of fulfilling a person. Additionally, within the context, acquiring knowledge is more important than *true belief* (Hetherington, 2020). This is discussed in Plato's *Meno* where Socrates and Meno discuss whether knowledge is more valuable than true belief. Even though the main concern of *Meno*'s dialogue is virtue and whether virtue can be considered knowledge, Plato discusses knowledge briefly. Knowledge according to Plato is necessary to acquire virtue. Knowing things through is more virtuous than accepting true beliefs without effort (Plato, 1924, p. 260-263). For example, a triangle to be three sided rationally discovered by a person is better than learning it is three sided by another person. That pursue has value in itself.

Virtue epistemology argues that acquiring knowledge is virtuous. Known by Aristotelian ethics, virtue ethics considers acquiring various virtues is intellectually rewarding. For example, acquiring an intellectual ability (e.g. fast arithmetic) makes a person more reliable and being reliable is virtuous. Learning patience (a virtue) can be self-rewarding. Personal achievement becomes a reason for people to pursue and become virtuous (Hetherington, 2020).

Pursuing knowledge at times can be for helping others and not the self because a person who has knowledge is reliable and can be helpful to others - for example, when someone pursues knowledge in acts of testimony. In court testimonies, pursuing knowledge can be used to either support the case or to add unto the court case. Hence, a person becomes a reliable informant (Hetherington, 2020).

Pragmatic encroachment within knowing or usefulness is another reason a person would like to know. Acquired knowledge can be used in many useful ways that assist a person's life. Even though knowledge might have an intrinsic value but it can help in a person's life in everyday or pragmatic situations. This falls unto what Fantl and McGrath call a pragmatic approach. Even though they focus on epistemology, the pragmatic approach includes action, best results, preference and inquiry. All of these are pragmatic in the daily lives of people. If you know p exists, depending on how relevant p is for the person, one ought to do an action about p . (Fantl, & McGrath, 2009-11-05, p. 60-65).

The last type of knowledge is assertions of actions or knowledge. There is, in every human, the need for a degree of certainty. Before a person drives a car, they need to be certain it is functional. Before making any scientific assertion, they require to be certain. Before they can make a judgement, certainty is needed. Additionally, it can be argued that knowledge, irrespective of what it can do, is the functionality of our daily lives. This argument is propounded by Williamson in his epistemology that without knowledge and the requirement of assertion, communication and states of exchange cannot exist. Additionally, Williamson would argue that without knowledge assertion in testimonial court cases then nothing can be achieved, this makes knowledge assertion important (Goldberg, 2009-10-01, p. 61-63).^{*} Additionally, the pursue of certainty is followed by the tradition of Philosophers in which they would use different methods to try to define how knowledge has come about (epistemology) and make assertions to those outcomes. In the section below, various theories of epistemology will be briefly explained.

^{*}This essay does not focus on Williamson but only presents a small section as to why people would pursue knowledge. To know more about Williamson's epistemology, see *Williamson on Knowledge* by Patrick Greenough and Duncan Pritchard.

Various theories of epistemology

Various theories of epistemology have been developed to understand what is knowledge.

Plato's Theory of Forms bases epistemology on metaphysical reality of form and matter. In book five of the *Republic*, Plato distinguishes between a person who is knowledgeable and one who is not. He begins by saying that senses are not enough for a person to acquire knowledge, and that it requires consciousness and self-awareness. Because if sense-perception is used as knowledge, then every person would be wisest of them all thinking their perception is the right knowledge. Plato does not disregard senses, but rather consider it to be part of knowledge. (Copleston, 2014, p. 144-145). He then distinguishes between knowledge, opinions and ignorance: Ignorance is acting without being aware of oneself; knowledge is awareness of the self and meta-reality of the self (explained furthermore); and opinions are the middle-line between both (Plato, 2013, p. 181-182). Plato bases knowledge on an ontological definition that it should be (1) infallible, (2) and of the real. According to Plato, knowledge cannot be in *vacuo* (empty), it must have a relation to an object. As long it contains those two, then it is considered *true* knowledge (Copleston, 2014, p. 143-144 & 149). For example, the sentence "Athenian constitution is good" has the term of goodness which is fixed on its own. If the constitution was 'bad' then the term bad is still a fixed term. Also, the constitution did not change - it is the same constitution whether good or bad. However, if a particular constitution is bad, then there is a reference to that particular constitution. All of these terms used are true knowledge and even when it becomes a particular to an event or a *type* object, the terms are still infallible and *real*. These independent terms are called *universals* and when referencing to an object in the real world, they are *particulars*. Each universal according to Plato corresponds to an objective reality (p. 149-152).

A brief example of Plato's analogy of the line is to imagine a horizontal line with five points - A, B, C, D and E. AB is called imagination. BC is conviction, CD is math knowledge, DE is reason. AB and BC fall under opinion and BC and CD is knowledge. As explained earlier, if a person was asked what is justice and the person answered justice is in particular place or item or situation, then that person is mentioning an opinion and not knowledge. However, if the person apprehends justice as its own, then the person is thinking of the form of justice, the *universal* of justice (p. 152). An extended example is to take a 'tree'. In AB, a tree is a painting while in BC, a tree is the visible tree in the real world. In CD, a tree is the mathematical tree (e.g. shape, size) and DE is the ideal tree in world of forms. True knowledge is the apprehension of a tree in DE. The reason why Plato develops a full-fledged epistemology is the value of knowledge. With his discussions with Meno, he points out that knowledge has value in itself. Therefore, to pursue knowledge or as to why is there a point in 'knowing', Plato states that it is valuable.

Scepticism is a philosophy stance that starts the question of questioning. And at times, scepticism may friction with common-sense - especially when it about the philosophical question, 'whether I know if you know that I know'. Descartes scepticism is known to be beginning of the modern western philosophy of asking epistemological question of knowing anything. His scepticism is different from the ancients or first philosophy. Where ancients asked if objects are real, Descartes asked whether he exists (Brown & Normore, 2019-11-14, p. 6-8).

Descartes begins his scepticism in his major work, *Meditations*. The *Meditations* is a six day meditation period where Descartes mentions his reflection after each day. In the first *Meditation*, Descartes sets out by asking, how can he know his beliefs are correct? All of the things he believed from others can be false. He begins with the senses or empirical doubts, they can be deceiving at times. For example, food is delicious but horrid when sick, seeing a back of a friend

and running after them only to find it is a stranger. Therefore, senses can deceive him. Additional to his scepticism, a person cannot know whether they are dreaming or awake, or local doubts. He then doubts whether that he exists at all - by imagining a malicious demon who is tricking him to have a body but he really does not (Descartes, 1641, p. 1-2). So he sets out in disbelieving everything (temporarily). In a basket of apples, if some are rotten and some are not, all of them have to be taken out and only the good ones put back (Descartes, 1642, p. 127). He then argues that if an evil malicious demon exists that deceives him all the time that he cannot escape, then people will be stuck in an infinite radical scepticism. Then Descartes argues that if the demon is deceiving him on everything, there is one thing the demon cannot deceive Descartes on and that he is thinking/doubting (Descartes, 1641, p. 4-5). He reaches the conclusion in his infamous line “I think therefore, I exist” (p. 5; Descartes, 1637, p. 15). Therefore, even if everyone can doubt everything, there is one thing they cannot doubt - thinking mind or Self (according to Descartes, this was the soul).

Just like the apple analogy, Descartes threw out everything (beliefs and senses) and added his thinking mind as the good apple. From here on, Descartes builds his foundational epistemology starting with him knowing he is certain he exists. From this foundation, Descartes continues to argue about the existence of God and the physical world. He argues, if God ceased to exist, then humans must have come from a cause and effect principle. If the cause and effect principle was accepted, then two thoughts, according to Descartes, appear. First, something cannot arise from nothing. Second, something perfect cannot derive from something less perfect. He provides an analogy that when something is existing of a cause, it may not have the exact qualities as the previous one, but it can have a ‘higher’ one. For example, hotness does not require to be hot (caused by hotness), but hot is a higher form of hotness. Cause and effect cannot regress

infinitely by logic, there must be a first cause. According to Descartes, the first cause must be an archetype that has all ideas. Descartes argues God to be the first principle by the ontological definition of God. Therefore, God exists. Since God by his ontological definition is good, then God does not want evil for Descartes and will not deceive him (Descartes, 1641, p. 10-17). Since God is good and Descartes knows he exists, God would not deceive him. By using the Cartesian doubt, Descartes is able to build his beliefs according to the epistemological system. Similarly, for the external world, Descartes argues that for material objects to exist, they must have depth, length, and width. As stated previously, cause and effect cannot regress infinitely, therefore it must have a cause. The objects even if he did not acquire them by senses, he did not create them in his head, ontologically they exist. Descartes provides an example of a triangle, which by its ontological definition, has three sides. If it has four, then it is false and not a triangle.

Additionally, an extension of the material argument, he asserts his body exists by the same argument that his body has length, depth and width (p. 18-27). Therefore, according to Descartes why one should pursue knowledge is to know what is real and certain and not fall in deception. Assertions and certainties becomes Descartes reason for pursuing knowledge.

G.E. Moore's epistemology is famous for being pragmatic in real life situations. As explained earlier, pragmatic reason for normative discourses in life and assertion is a reason for pursuing knowledge. Moore's existence of knowledge of the self is considered *absolutely* pragmatic.

Moore claims that when a person says they are 'certain' of something, it means what it means and that they are 'certain'. This jibe comes from a common-sense perspective, when it is said 'I am certain I exist'. Simply, that person knows they exist. He argues that there are seven assertion/sentences that when it is said, the person is certain:

1. He's at present in a room rather than outside it

- 2.He's standing up rather than sitting or lying down
- 3.He's clothed rather than naked
- 4.He's speaking in a loud voice rather than singing, whispering or keeping silent
- 5.He's holding some sheets of paper with writing on them
- 6.There are many other people in the room he is in
- 7.There's a window in one wall and a door in another (pointing). (Moore, 1968, p. 27)

The seven assertions are *absolutely* certain according to Moore and can be used as test case scenarios when in doubt (p. 37 & 53). Taking assertion two, when a person says 'I am standing up', they are simply standing up and they are sure they are standing up. Moore also adds at times the language of discourse is a reason why people cannot know they are certain. What Moore claims is that there are four ways to mention 'certain' and they are: I feel certain that, I am certain that, I know for certain that and It is certain that (p. 39). Whatever usage of the sentences, the one using them knows in their heart/brain they are certain. Moore adds that those seven assertions are proof to an external world (p. 40 & 46). His argument follows in this respect:

1. I see hands.
2. If I see hands, there is an external world.
3. Therefore, there is an external world.

Anticipating a sceptic's counter-attack, where a sceptic might say 'How can a person know even if there is a chance of them dreaming that there is an external world?'. Moore counters 'how can a sceptic know otherwise?' (p. 47). For a person to know they are standing up, first they need to *know* they are standing up and they need to *think* they are standing up. Assuming a person is not

standing up. However, if that person *thinks* and *knows* they are standing up, then despite what a sceptic might say, according to Moore, that person is standing up (p. 50). Moore adds to the common-sense argument, according to the sceptic, if a person has a chance of being in a dream and not in reality, then that specific person knows the difference between dreaming and reality. Therefore, *a priori* that person knows at one point in their life that they dreamt and woke up (p. 50-53). A problem with Moore's argument is that he uses language in a loose manner. Simply saying you have hands does not necessarily mean they exist (Pryor, 2004, p. 349). Unger does not attack Moore's account, but argues in the same manner that the problem with people not perceiving one another is due to language (Unger, 1971, p. 216).

Some argue that Moore attacks the concept of scepticism and is a defender of common-sense. However, that is far from what Moore attributes to himself. Even though he provides an argument for common-sense, he does not neglect scepticism but does not endorse it either (Preston, n.d.). Therefore, Moore's epistemology focuses on pragmatism for everyday lives of people and assertions that are needed to satisfy the desire of humans. Hence, Moore's epistemology is importantly needed in courts for being certain before judgements.

After Moore's argument was presented, Peter Unger provides a defence for scepticism. Similar to Moore's account, Unger proclaims from the beginning and the end of his paper, the main problem philosophers have with scepticism is due to language (Unger, 1971, p. 199 & 216).

Even though certainty is required for knowledge, according to Unger, what he sets out to do for scepticism is to show "every human being knows, at best, hardly anything to be so." (p. 198). In other words, as long as doubt is always possible, then certainty cannot be achieved. He explains that there are two worries to scepticism. First, when people lack knowledge yet assert they possess it. Second, if language is the problem of scepticism, then terms used need to be isolated

and de-marked from common communication. He introduces two of his terms - absolute and relative terms. Absolute terms are words used that cannot be measured to its definition. For example, “flat” which means “something absolutely flat”. There is no measurement as to how flat it is. It is simply flat. However, terms such as “bumpy” or “curve” are measurable. For example, “This road is *very* bumpy” or “This road is *not* very/that bumpy”. Therefore, these words are relative terms (p. 202-203). After playing with terms and defining them, Unger focuses on the term “certain” - which he claims to be an absolute term. He claims when it is mentioned, it is with certainty mentioned. For example, “if person *a* is certain”, then that person without a doubt is certain. Hence, “It is certain that *p*” then without a doubt it is *p* (p. 209-210).

Unger agrees with Moore’s common sense that language is at hand at the requirement of certainty is needed for knowledge. However, he disproves the thesis of certainty of language by simply showing people even if they are certain, they hardly know anything. For example, when a teacher asks a student “when was the battle of Hasting fought?”, the student might know it was the year 1066, however, the teacher asks the question knowing the student knows the answer. The student is not certain the answer is 1066 even though he knows it is 1066 from their previous studies. So, Unger asks, how does the teacher or the student be certain in knowing that they know the answer? What Unger suggests is the juxtaposing of terms such as “really” and “actually” with “know”, where a sentence becomes more accurate “The student *really* knows when the battle of Hasting was fought” (p. 214-215). Therefore, if a sentence said “He really knows that it is raining, but he isn’t certain of it.” will only show ambiguity, and if it is added “He really knows that it is raining, but he isn’t actually certain of it.”. This shows that knowing something requires certainty, however, at the end of the day, we hardly know anything (p. 216-218). Therefore, according to Unger, practicality is the requirement of knowledge. Though he

agrees certainties is knowledge, humans cannot reach certainty as long as doubt is an open option.

Conclusion

After we saw the difference between the different types of knowledge, then the difference between truth and knowledge followed. Then reasons are discussed for why people would pursue knowledge. Various theories were provided and at the end of each theory it has shown why this theory has a relation to the reasons. As to answer the question “Is there any point in trying to define ‘knowledge’?”, the writer provides many reasons why different people choose different reasons. The writer holds on the practicality of everyday life and the requirement for certainty when certainty is needed. But value in itself is perhaps what the writer finds the most important. Therefore, the writer finds Plato’s theory of forms cogent. As Plato discusses in book 5 of *The Republic*, even if absolute justice cannot occur, the reason to discuss absolute justice is to ‘know’ it and emulate it at best (Plato, 2013, p. 174). Similarly, for knowledge. Philosophers create theories in order to try to reach the perfect point of what we can call knowledge, yet we know we cannot. Nonetheless, we ought to emulate to our best to reach certainty of knowledge, for that is food for our mind.

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