

“Doubt is the key to knowledge” (Persian Proverb) to what extent is this true in two areas of knowledge?

To answer this question we must first more clearly understand the statement, “Doubt is the key to knowledge”. Knowledge can be described as the possession of information in psychological form which has been obtained through reason, perception, emotion or language; it is a justified true belief. The question is whether doubting a piece of information will lead to knowledge. We shall look at obtaining knowledge concerning the past (history) as well as present (human sciences). These two areas of knowledge are a good way to see whether doubt is the key to knowledge when it concerns human nature as both are focused on human nature but history focuses on the past and human sciences on the present.

In History we obtain knowledge by viewing primary and secondary sources. It is different from other areas of knowledge because we do not firsthand perceive events but must use sources to obtain knowledge. Hence we still use perception but can easily be fooled because we are not seeing things happening as they actually happen. This means we need to trust our other ways of knowing, namely: language, reason and emotions to decide what is true. For example it is reasonable to believe that with the amount of evidence for the holocaust, it has happened. We use language to understand many artifacts such as diaries, film etc. Lastly emotion can be used to deduce others emotions for example one could look at a photo of people from a concentration camp and see that they are miserable. However since this is secondary perception it is easy to deduce untruthful interpretations. The Germans made videos of concentration camps where the actors were told to act happy for example. As another example let’s look at the historiography of the foreign policy: appeasement followed by Britain and France in 1938. The Orthodox view on the subject developed in the 1940’s based on a book called “The Guilty Men”. This book supported the view where appeasement was considered a sign of weakness, criticizing Chamberlain for knowingly giving in to Hitler’s demands. Thus a source of knowledge about appeasement could be this book. However if one wasn’t to doubt it one would obtain information which is untrue, thus not knowledge according to the definition. It wasn’t until this view was doubted that the revisionist view developed. In 1967 (due to the 30 year rule of publishing government documents) the revisionist view was made believing that Chamberlain didn’t seem to have a viable alternative due to economic and military restraints as well as in interests for the British Empire. Thus doubt has lead to a more truthful piece of information but by the 1980’s an even newer view developed, the structuralist view, a combination of both previous views. This is one of many examples in history where doubt leads to uncovering further evidence proving some information untrue and leading to knowledge which can be considered a true, justified, belief. However the problem is how do we know if something is true or not? If doubting is the key to knowledge then we must doubt whether the information we are looking at is true or not, and if so how does doubting it help? Simply doubting is not enough but further research must be made. Then there have been examples of what one could call “over-doubting” in history. This leads to conspiracy-theories. For example there are people that believe the holocaust did not happen, despite the overwhelming evidence. In this case doubt is not the key to knowledge but in fact limits people from seeing the knowledge as true. The same situation with Armstrong’s landing on the moon. The video is said to be made in a studio. Again the source is

doubted to a point where one over sees the truth. The issue with history is that it concerns knowledge of the past thus must be based on sources whose reliability and purpose must be considered. Doubt is an important key in history to gain a non-biased truthful perspective. If one was to compare the writings of President Truman and Kim Il Sung on the Korean war one would find completely different perspectives. Doubt leads to finding a neutral one. However at the same time constant doubt can also lead to non-understanding of the event, a situation where false knowledge is obtained or where one over looks knowledge.

Human Sciences differs to History as it examines the present or recent past often to use the evidence to use for future purposes. They seek to find laws of the human nature. Economics for example aims to predict or prevent recessions. Obtaining concrete knowledge is problematic as humans are self-conscious, language-using, rational animals with a wide range of abilities such as creativity and imagination making every human different from another. On top of this as we are predicting into the future it is difficult to reckon with unexpected factors. In psychology there are several methods of human observation to gather information however we cannot see into the mind and as it operates on several levels we see only what the person chooses to show publicly. These methods involve using perception, emotion, language and reasoning as ways of knowing. However as one may perceive someone and the emotions you may deduce they have may greatly vary to the way someone else may. As humans we also have the ability to hide our true emotions, we can use language to mislead people from what we really feel. Thus it is difficult to use our ways of knowing to deduce truthful information of another person. Controlled experiments are difficult to do as it is impossible to control all variables surrounding humans. In surveys there is no guarantee for honesty and they must be done at random for a relevant sample. Statistics from an external source can be abused to show something misleading and when they were gathered they faced the same problems as the ones mentioned. Using reasoning one can of course conclude certain things from such data however with questionable accuracy. On the other hand in areas such as economics data is gathered with the purpose of finding trends to be used in the future. For example understanding principles of the economic cycle leads to a prediction and possible prevention of recessions and depressions. However since these trends are based on human action it is very difficult to predict into the future accurately and come up with a real truth. For example the economic cycle is a very basic idea of a trend but nations fluctuate and follow this model vaguely. It's the human factor and the possibility of an external factor which may change things which makes it difficult to come up with truths to use for future reference. Thus in Human sciences accuracy and reliability is difficult to achieve. Hence doubt plays a key role. For example in a court case one is innocent until proven guilty. Every piece of evidence is doubted. Witnesses are questioned to try to find a mistake in their stories so that an innocent person is not sent to jail. If witnesses and evidence were not doubted we would find ourselves in a situation like in many corrupt governments in the past and present where people can be executed on suspicion. In those cases no real knowledge was obtained, the people punished could have been innocent. It is through doubting cases that the truth is found and real knowledge is obtained. However this does not mean that doubt is the key to knowledge as it can also become an obstacle. For example if one were to have a case where the evidence is inconclusive, it may mean that one never finds the truth behind who committed the crime. One could however also argue that by finding out that the person is innocent you have still arrived at some sort of knowledge. But let's look at a different field of human sciences, at psychology. Let's consider Freud's theory of the id, ego and super-ego. There is no hard evidence to prove this theory correct. We could doubt it and strive

on to find evidence however in Human sciences evidence will always be vague. Thus doubting does not lead to further knowledge. Hence in human sciences it is difficult to say when doubt does and when it does not lead to knowledge. In some cases it is necessary to prove evidences reliability and accuracy however in some cases it will not further one towards knowledge.

So is doubt the key to knowledge? Doubt is a useful tool in History used to come up with a variety of views which help to test the reliability and accuracy of sources thus aiding in getting closer to real knowledge, however when doubt is in a sense "over-used" in history, one ends up with conspiracy theories and do not end up finding the knowledge one may be looking for. The accuracy of evidence in human sciences can be tested through doubt since it is a difficult science surrounding human behavior. In some areas such as economics one implies ones findings to the future thus to test them one has to believe they are true in the first place. Psychological theories are difficult to prove and doubting those does often not lead to knowledge. It is difficult to know when doubt will or not make it more likely that one arrives at real knowledge (true, justified, belief). The balance between how much to doubt and how much to believe is a difficult one and varies from case to case.

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