

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

Doubt had a profound influence on my life when I was fourteen years old. While writing an essay assigned by one of my freshman year teachers, I had the task of assessing evidence and making a decision as to whether evolution or Creationism led to life as we know it on Earth. It was the first time that I had ever actively thought about the origins of life. Prior to that, I had attended Sunday services more so out of family tradition than as a result of my faith. Religion had never been an important part of my life; therefore, I never felt the need to assess my beliefs. When I was forced to choose a side, however, things were different. I began to doubt the existence of God, and I found it hard to grasp and believe in the idea of some all-knowing force existing when it was not something tangible that I could see or touch or feel. My doubt had led me to an important discovery of self-knowledge.

By claiming that “doubt is the key to knowledge,” there is an assumption that knowledge cannot automatically be known or discovered without the existence of some preliminary trigger, in this case the existence of a substantial doubt. But is this always true? Psychology tells us that infants possess inborn reflexes that allow them to perform actions critical to their early survival. The sucking reflex, for example, causes the baby to automatically suck on anything put near its

mouth, which aids it in feeding. The infant's knowledge of how to feed did not come about because of some doubt the infant held; it was simply rooted in its brain. But the definition of knowledge gets hazy here; is this ability to feed considered the infant's knowledge? It is an action that the infant *inherently* knows how to do—but because it was always known to the infant, and it did not come about because of a doubt, would it be considered true knowledge? According to the Persian proverb, it would not be knowledge. For this essay, I will define knowledge as any justified true belief, as I was taught in my Theory of Knowledge course. Whether this is a belief about the self or the outside world is irrelevant for the purpose of this essay.

As stated in my personal example, I had never given any thought to the origin of the Universe and human life because it never held any importance to me. All that had mattered, in my view, was that human life existed, and that was that. Such could be true for this prescribed title as well; it is exploring the origins of knowledge, how we come to know what we know. Does the origin truly matter? As long as we possess the knowledge, does the way in which we arrived at that knowledge make any difference in the way we understand it or in the way we apply it to our own lives? In my example, the fundamental truth was still the same—that I existed. But the way in which I believed I came to be changed the way I viewed the world. The origin of the knowledge did not change the fundamental belief, but it altered the way in which I viewed that belief.

From a historical perspective, doubt can act as an incentive for people to re-analyze old facts and conduct further investigations into the past. When historical ideas and perspectives are left unchallenged, they are often not examined for further proof of accuracy. Doubt can shed light on an event or idea, on errors that historians may have made or on the limitations of certain

sources. A more personal example comes from my own family history. There is a small wooden plate that has hung in my bedroom for some time; it displays a hand-painted picture of a young girl bowing her head in prayer, with the words “giv oss i dag vårt dagliga bröd” painted around the rim—“give us this day our daily bread” in Swedish. My mother told me once when I was younger that my grandmother had painted the plate herself. After her death, I focused my attention on the plate once more. I had never seen my grandmother paint before, and I was not aware of any family ties to Sweden, so I started to think that perhaps my mother had made a mistake when she said the plate was painted by my grandmother. At a family gathering, I asked about the discrepancy. As it turns out, my great grandparents lived in Finland, as I had known, but they were part of a small portion of the Finnish population that speaks Swedish. In Michigan, my grandmother grew up speaking only Swedish. I found my investigation justifiable, since I do not have a particularly large family in which it is the custom to share ancestral stories, as there are not very many to disclose. My doubt about the origins of the plate drove my curiosity, and curiosity is a strong motivator in many endeavors.

If there is always a present doubt about the course of history, there would be an endless chain of historical investigations, always searching for the truth, and new evidence to back it up—a revision of history. However, people may have different views on what the truth may be, leading to constant disputes about what happened and what did not. For instance, while Holocaust deniers’ call for a new investigation into the truth may be spurred by anti-Semitic feelings, they are nonetheless providing a doubt that incites their search for some kind of new knowledge. However, some may produce the counterclaim that there may be disputes concerning how we can really know what happened in history. Documents could be forged, and evidence lost or forgotten. However, it is important to realize that there is a commonly accepted definition

of history in society—a collection of events which have occurred in the past—and therefore any true evidence unearthed (such as documents or artifacts) qualifies as being part of history and representing a certain culture or event. Hard evidence and personal accounts are obviously varying forms of historical truth—a person’s memories may be falsified or simply misconstrued, thus being subjective. So long as there is evidence that could be subject to interpretation, there will remain a doubt about its true validity.

Doubts about an issue reveal the extent to which our beliefs influence the way in which we gather knowledge. Art is an area of knowledge in which our beliefs have a complete effect on how we view art, as well as how we classify things as ‘art’ and ‘not art.’ In my Theory of Knowledge class, during a discussion of what is and is not art, my teacher gave us this example to think about: one woman looks at a tree and simply sees a tree, just a part of nature. Another woman, a painter, looks at the same tree but instead sees the negative space surrounding it; she claims that the tree is art because of this. Likewise, a religious person may say that the tree is art because it was created by the hand of God, thus making it His creation. Conversely, an atheist may claim that since God does not exist, the tree is nothing more than something grown from the ground, something found in nature. The beliefs of the Christian and the atheist justify their descriptions of the tree, just as the views of the woman and the painter serve as justification for their statements. The doubt surrounding the question inspires the people to draw from what they believe they know. Since there is no definitive answer to the question of whether or not the tree is art, people must draw from their own beliefs to provide their own answers to the question.

The implications of this, that doubt reveals to what extent we use our own beliefs to examine an issue, proves that nothing can be definitively classified as being just one thing—differing beliefs will shadow judgment and produce differing answers. Some people may counter

that doubt is not the most important aspect in this equation to identify the extent of influence our beliefs hold. While there may be other means to reveal how much control a person's belief system has over him or her, doubt in this case acts as the instigator and provides a medium for judging the extent of that control. I am not claiming that doubt is all-inclusive in being the key to knowledge, simply that it is one way on the path to knowing something.

"Doubt is the key to knowledge." Through history and art this statement seems to bear truth, as doubt acts as incentive and also unveils deeper issues. An issue that stems from this quote, however, is whether it is more important to know what knowledge was inspired by or to know the knowledge itself. In my personal examples, the quest for knowledge was more important to me than the conclusion, in the end. To know what inspired that quest is important, because it would be easier to recognize something worth knowing if the trigger which inspired it is present—in the proverb, doubt. When something is uncontested, it may not mean that it is absolutely true; it may be that no one has brought a doubt upon it, therefore never igniting a quest for knowledge.

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