

000671-022

Are some ways of knowing more likely than others to lead to truth?

One important question to investigate before this title can be fully addressed is that of the nature of truth itself. Determining what exactly truth is may be more difficult than it initially appears. When Plato described knowledge as being a “justified true belief”, he created some qualifications for truth in the context of knowledge. Plato argued that for something to be true, it must be true for everyone, be independent of anyone’s belief, and be eternal. Paring these qualifications with justification and belief, Plato would consider my knowledge claim that man has landed on the moon valid, because it is justified, given my evidence by consensus, it happens to be true, and I believe it. Investigating that knowledge claim further, however, several issues become apparent. Firstly, how valid my justification may be is rather subjective, and secondly, Plato’s method is not very effective for measuring either knowledge or truth because it is circular in requiring that one knows something is true before one can know something is true.

Many philosophers have since developed several other theories of truth in an attempt to solve these problems. Three common examples of these theories are the pragmatic, coherence, and correspondence theories of truth. The pragmatic theory of truth holds that if a knowledge claim is useful and works, then it is true. I believe, for example, that I have free will. This knowledge claim may not definitively provable, and as a matter of fact, one result of the free will theorem of theoretical physics, as well as a faction of behaviorism in psychology, could make a convincing argument against that claim. Nevertheless, I accept this knowledge claim as true because it is useful in my life, as it allows me comfort and motivation. The pragmatic theory falls through, however, when something is useful and appears to work but is in fact incorrect. Many people hold

May 08

8. Are some ways of knowing more likely than others to lead to truth?

Samuel Sutherland, Tualatin High School

000671-022

superstitions or beliefs which serve a pragmatic purpose in their lives, but many of these contradict each other, and as such cannot all be true. The coherence theory of truth argues that something is true if it coheres with other established truths. Knowing the purpose of doors, I can then assume that there is something behind a door that I have never opened. This theory is useful as it allows one to conjecture and hold knowledge without having personal experience of that knowledge. It too, however, can easily lead to factual inaccuracies. Were the coherence theory of truth sufficient to qualify all truth, scientists would never be surprised by findings which violated their expectations, as often happens. The last theory of truth, the correspondence theory, asserts that something is true if it accurately describes reality. This theory matches most closely with the common notion of truth held by most people; however it can be quite difficult to determine if something accurately describes reality due to the prevalence of interfering limitations.

While some combination of these various theories of truth allows one to function in most situations, viewing their limitations calls all knowledge into question. Returning to Plato's justified true belief system, all that can truly be evaluated is the validity of the justification. Determining what ways of knowing are more valid than others depends largely on whether truth must be independent of the knower, or can be subjective.

It seems reasonable to assume that there are objective truths. Indeed it is difficult to conceive of a world without them. The very fact that multiple people all seem to hold similar ideas of the characteristics of any familiar object would suggest that there are objectively true things about that object. So assuming that truth is universal and independent of any given knower, what are then the ways of knowing most likely to lead to such truth?

000671-022

Perception, reason, authority, and consensus would all seem to be collectively valid justifications for knowing an objective truth. Pragmatically speaking, perception is valid in the cliché sense that “seeing is believing”. After all, I would be hard pressed to believe that this computer is not here when I am seeing, feeling, and interacting with it. Beyond perception, reason can lead to unperceivable knowledge. Through processes of deduction, all valid arguments are infallible so long as the premises upon which they are based are true. Reason allows us to go beyond perception, and develop significant portions of entire areas of knowledge, such as mathematics, history, as well as natural and human sciences. Between perception and reason virtually all commonly accepted knowledge has been established. Where I cannot appeal to personal experience or my own reasoning, I often believe things based on authority or consensus. I accept the vast majority of my education to be true based one of these two ways of knowing. All scientific conclusions, historical conjecture, or mathematical theorems that I have not personally verified I accept solely on the basis of authority. By accepting these two ways of knowing as likely sources for truth, one can both increase his learning and efficiently build upon common knowledge. Perception, reason, authority and consensus appear to satisfy all theories of truth that have been discussed to the greatest extent.

It must be taken into account, however, that all the theories of truth addressed thus far operate under both the assumption that an objective reality exists, and that it can be accurately observed. There are, however, many problems with those assumptions. It is impossible to disprove the solipsist. Along the lines of Descartes’ investigation, it is wholly possible, however implausible, that I am currently dreaming a very vivid dream, or am in a coma, or am otherwise capable of constructing an imaginary reality around me

May 08

8. Are some ways of knowing more likely than others to lead to truth?

Samuel Sutherland, Tualatin High School

000671-022

and convincing myself that it is real. Alternatively, I could be imprisoned in this imaginary realm by another being with such power. While these notions seem very implausible, and have little or no evidence to support them, they cannot be disproven, and I can therefore know virtually nothing with certainty.

Given that uncertainty, it is then necessary to reevaluate the ways of knowing which were most strongly dependent on the assumption of an objective reality that is accurately perceived. Perception is easily fooled, which can be proven with a multitude of illusions. Perception alone would lead to the idea of a geocentric universe, given the lack of sensation of motion, and the apparent parallax of other planets. While one could argue that the inadequacies of perception are compensated for with reason, reason itself has many flaws. While pure deduction may be infallible, it is very rarely applied purely. Most commonly, casual reasoning, which is often erroneous, is used, and where logic is attempted to be applied more formally, a plethora of logical fallacies are often present. Even when deduction is applied flawlessly, it is still dependent on the truth of its premises, which are at best established by induction. The problem with induction is that it assumes that past trends will continue. Gravity, for example, is based on the induced reasoning that every time I drop a piece of normal matter, it will fall to the earth, but there is no guarantee beyond past experience that it will continue to fall in future tests. One does not have to look far to find examples where both consensus and authority were false as well. It was only a few centuries ago that nearly everybody believed that the earth was flat. At any point in history there were many assumptions held by both the general populous and authorities of the time that have since been proven incorrect, and it is therefore logical to assume that such inaccuracies exist in modern paradigms as well.

000671-022

There may be room for some certainty, however. Descartes famously concluded that, "I think, therefore I am." While what exactly I may be is guesswork, it is irrefutable to me that I exist in one form or another, given that I am capable of having this thought process at all. Along these lines personal knowledge claims that either do not apply universally to reality, or are otherwise acceptably subjective are also difficult to refute. The belief that I feel a certain way is likely to be true, as the subject matter, being myself, definitively exists, and the only thing to distort my observation would be the language with which I qualify it. By this line of thought, a quite different hierarchy of validity to different ways of knowing arises, one which values the personal dependence above the objective relevance. Ways of knowing such as emotion would then be most likely to lead to truth, potentially followed by others such as intuition, faith, or other similarly personal evidences.

In the end, it would seem that which ways of knowing are most likely to lead to truth depends entirely on what is considered to be truth. If truth must be universal and objective, as Plato would suggest, then perception, reason, authority, and consensus appear to be the most valid. If universal truth is thought of as fundamentally unknowable, then emotion, followed by intuition and faith would have the greatest level of certainty. Pragmatically, I accept that there is an ultimate truth, and therefore feel that reason and perception are most likely to guide me to it as they are more objective in nature themselves. At the same time, I recognize that emotion is the least doubtful of all ways of knowing, though it is limited in what conclusions can be drawn from it.

Word Count: 1,573