

**“The knowledge that we value the most is the knowledge for which we  
can provide the strongest justifications.”  
To what extent would you agree with this claim?**

Socrates defined knowledge as “justified true belief”. How we tend to ‘value’ knowledge would most likely depend on the importance we place on it; hence, it could be said that ‘value’ in this context is subjective. Additionally, we should also consider the fact that there are different types of knowledge, and different ways of knowing (i.e. perception, emotion, reason and language). Consequently, there may also be different denotations of ‘justification’. This could be anything from visual evidence, expressions of thought, or personal validations (e.g. beliefs, values, cultural convictions, intuition).

In order to determine the strength of a ‘justification’, we must examine the various impacts that external factors have on it. Factors such as cultural or religious beliefs, upbringing, education and even the age we live in, can affect our perception of what is ‘true’ and ‘acceptable’. For example, if we consider the rapid progress technology has made over the past 50 years or so, we can also observe the changing attitudes that have accompanied it. Nowadays, when we need to verify information, we only have to type it into “Google”, or any other web-based search engine, to unearth millions of websites offering answers. Compare this to only a few decades ago, when people only had the choice of consulting other people, or books, and travelled to libraries to do their research. While many may argue that the convenience, and indeed, speed of the Internet is unmatched, a certain degree of unreliability still exists when consulting these sources, as information can be posted by anyone from anywhere.

As a result, the ‘value’ of this knowledge is questionable. We are also provided with an extraordinary plethora of sources and answers on the Internet: all possible forms of ‘justification’. The more information we are given, the less valuable it becomes to us. Thus, the knowledge claim that valued knowledge requires strong justification may not apply in this case. From a personal viewpoint, being confronted by this immense collection of resources often confuses me further, rather than enhancing my understanding, as I am never certain which one will provide me with the most valid answer.

Are some people more likely to value the teachings of elders in place of modern education? Many ancient cultures are dying out due to younger generations abandoning their traditional way of life and religious teachings as they are influenced by and attracted to the urbanised lifestyles in developing cities. They may disregard rituals that were previously carried out to ‘please the Gods’ as there has been no proof that these ‘Gods’ exist. However, we must question whether this change of belief is truly because they are convinced by the evidence provided by modern science, or because their personal priorities lie in conforming to modern society, and becoming independent from the indigenous community.

Humans have a tendency to prefer knowledge that can be justified easily. As an article from the New York Times states: “People in this modern day and age are torn between remaining loyal to their traditional, religious or cultural beliefs, and conforming to the rest of society in its ‘age of information’, and adopting rational, logical, possibly agnostic/passive views on these.” For the most part, studying in greater depth what we already know, is seen by some as being far more useful than spending time uncovering truths about knowledge we cannot provide empirical proof for. An example of this is the importance many people place on scientific knowledge. It is agreed that many theories of modern science are built upon ‘facts’ and ‘laws’ created by scientists and thinkers in the past. Experimentation – for example, the ‘smoke cell’ experiment to show Brownian motion and thus justify the particle theory – over centuries has provided us with proof for these, proof that has been observed and justified by more than one individual, thus turning theories into universal ‘facts’.

Keeping in mind Edward Teller’s words: “A fact is a simple statement that everyone believes. It is innocent, unless found guilty. A hypothesis is a novel suggestion that no one wants to believe. It is guilty, until found effective”, our faith in science is questionable. While we rejoice in new discoveries and breakthroughs in research, we silently disregard the fact that no matter how ground-breaking the proposal, it remains a ‘theory’ till ‘proven’ through empirical knowledge. For example, quantum physics relies on ‘string theory’. Atheists or non-believers in God and other metaphysical beings may sneer at those who adamantly follow their religious faith, however, they should remember that celebrated scientific theories without solid ‘proof’ are as unreliable as the beliefs that God exists.

For centuries, religious beliefs have presided over science; with over 80% of the world’s population following some form of organised religious faith, many continue to accept the laws of scriptures in place of

scientific thought today. If the idea that justification was all people needed to value knowledge was true, would we not discard our religious beliefs once science triumphed, since 'objective' proof of metaphysical beings and gods has yet to be found? I, personally, have several Christian friends who study IB Biology at Higher Level, yet refuse to accept the possibility of Evolution and strongly maintain the belief that we are all 'descendants of Adam and Eve'. Thus, we are faced with the question of whether 'justification' in this sense means proof or faith. Ultimately, people believe in what they find easiest to argue or explain, with solid evidence to reinforce their defence. While relying on gut feelings and instincts are subjective responses, providing justifications accepted or used by many is seen as more reliable: we need objective arguments.

Maths is a subject that is built on logical deduction and fact, hence, justification of mathematical theories by proof is necessary, and is of much greater value to us than complex theorems which cannot be proved and put to use. We cannot intuitively 'know' when something is right or wrong with a mathematical equation, instead, we must employ logic, reason and rational thinking in order to prove its validity. In this case, the knowledge claim that justified knowledge is more valuable proves to be correct.

In contrast, Art is perceived as an area of knowledge that is concerned with a predominantly subjective approach: the artist could draw inspiration from all areas of knowledge and ways of knowing. Thus, subjectivity is only limited in the sense that it produces approaches/responses from one individual only; hence procuring several unique responses, rather than one objective one. Thus, in this case, knowledge does not require strong justifications to be of value. The artist in question is not interested in 'solving' anything, nor does he wish to 'prove' anything. He has devoted time and effort into making something meaningful, and his only wish may be to fulfil his interest in seeing how others react to his creation, or simply to derive personal satisfaction from it.

When considering Areas of Knowledge like the Arts, the knowledge we gain and our justifications for it are open to interpretation. We can only justify our subjective knowledge: the responses evoked within us by the art itself. Are these internal reactions strong enough to be of value to us, or do they fail to render themselves as 'true justifications'? Thus, there is a degree of uncertainty when judging the value of justifications within areas of knowledge: some subjects seem to demand a personal bias in order to derive meaning from it; others rely on reason and objective logic to obtain the 'true' answer. The value we place in either of these is purely subjective: while I feel that knowledge is gained through our subjective responses and experiences, my friend does not appreciate this viewpoint, and prefers to make logical deductions as a way of gaining knowledge.

However, there may be times when we are required to put our biases aside: the study of History involves the examination of primary and secondary sources, information that provides 'evidence' for events that took place in the past. Yet, possessing a large number of sources to back up claims is not enough; these sources need to be tested for reliability, and biases must be noted. Thus, these sources are limited in their justification of the events: here, the value of knowledge does depend on the strength of the justification. Conversely, we could consider a counterclaim: the study of Ethics often asks us to question the reasoning behind so-called 'moral truths'. For example, we know that murder is 'wrong'. But why is it wrong? People prefer to accept views like this without proper justification, because there is a certain challenge involved in attempting to explain this standpoint logically.

While it may be conventionally accepted that knowledge accompanied by convincing justifications is preferred to knowledge based merely on speculation, I disagree with the claim that only fully justified knowledge is valued. If 'value' is to be interpreted in terms of importance to an individual, then it is impossible to generalise and pass off an objective statement. For example, many people may disregard intuition as a way of knowing, however, it still plays a very important role in our lives: an inexplicable feeling of discomfort or nervousness would still affect us. As previously discussed, it is possible that the knowledge we may treasure the most is that which has not yet been broken down, analysed and deprived of further exploration. Hence, it may be the unjustifiable knowledge, the unknown truths about religion, life after death, the universe and human nature that we value. The value of knowledge is based on its importance to us, and is ultimately, a subjective decision.

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