

9. "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?  
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**[00 – 0506 – 045]**

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**[0506]**

Essay on a Prescribed Title

title 9: ***"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?"***

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## **“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?**

I disagree with this statement in considering each of the six areas of knowledge, although it holds some currency in Sciences and Mathematics with significant exceptions. It is particularly inapplicable to the Arts, and a vital part of human knowledge not specified as an "area of knowledge": Religion. Both disciplines are central to cultural practices and individuals around the globe, yet this type of knowledge is difficult to justify in a universally accepted way. To commence the discussion, it is necessary to define 'knowledge'. In accordance with the foundation statement, knowledge will be defined as "*justified true belief*"<sup>1</sup>.

The primary knowledge issue raised by this statement is justification, with two parts: its constitution and evaluation. Justification is the reason we hold for a belief, based on one or more 'ways of knowing': language, perception, reason or emotion<sup>2</sup>. Yet each cognitive process has a significant limitation. With relation to perception, Empiricist philosophy argues that "*all knowledge is ultimately based on perceptual experience*"<sup>3</sup>, however while studying Modern History, we are taught to constantly question the reliability of eye-witnesses in primary sources, given the totally different perspectives often held by two observers of the same event. For example, in the Greek resistance in World War II, a Greek resistance fighter wrote of the widespread support for Communist-based organisation EAM<sup>4</sup>, while British reporter J.M. Stevens argued "*only 50% of EAM were willing members*"<sup>5</sup>. For this reason, justification is typically classified, as in the subject of this essay, in relative – "strongest" – as opposed to absolute – "strong" – terms. When analysed separately, the limitations of the individual ways of knowing challenge the notion of totally reliable knowledge.

Furthermore, cross-disciplinary comparison of justifications are impeded as each area of knowledge necessitates a different combination of the 'ways of knowing', and each one has a different limitation: it is simpler to evaluate the relative strength of two claims about the Natural Sciences, than one claim about Arts and one about Ethics. For example, the Ptolemaic model was justified by sense perception - the naked eye - observing that Venus appeared at a constant size throughout the year. However, Copernicus' claim that Venus orbits the sun and

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Meno* [dialogue], available at <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/meno.html>, viewed on 10th August 2008. This definition was widely accepted until challenged by the Gettier problem [1963] and the resultant Reliabilism [the theory that "knowledge is differentiated from true belief by the reliability of our cognitive processes" as stated in 'The Analysis of Knowledge', January 2006, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/>, viewed on 19th August, 2008.] However Plato's definition is used as a 'primary starting point' in the IB Theory of Knowledge course.

<sup>2</sup> R. van de Lagemaat, *Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Lagemaat, op. cit., p. 86.

<sup>4</sup> "Eighty per cent of Greece was behind EAM" 'Escape from Death' by Evangelos Iannou in Scarfe, A. and W. (comp.) *All that Grief: Migrant Recollections of Greek resistance to Fascism, 1941 – 1949*, Hale and Iremonger, Australia, 1994, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> J.M. Stevens in Baerentzen, L. (ed.) *British Reports on Greece 1943 – 1944*, Museum Tusulanum Press, Copenhagen, 1982, p. 14

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consequently should appear at varying sizes was justified through sense perception with Galileo's more accurate telescope.<sup>6</sup> Thus it is evident that Copernicus' claim had a stronger justification. Yet the justifications of the statements "Madame Bovary is a searing insight into the female psyche" and "capital punishment is wrong" are more difficult to compare. The Arts statement is primarily based on emotion – the reader's connection with the protagonist - and language – the ability to understand Flaubert's prose – as well as an aspect of perception providing a reference point for previously experienced female behaviour. On the other hand, the Ethics statement, for an anti-death penalty campaigner, would be considered as founded on a combination of reason – if a convicted murderer deserves execution for their crime, then the State, following the execution, is similarly guilty –, and emotion – compassion for the family of the convicted and the executioner.

The crux of the knowledge issue of justification is evident in this example of ethical knowledge about the death penalty. It is a controversial contemporary issue given the stringent drug penalties in South-Eastern Asia, often applying to Australian citizens like the Vietnamese-Australian Van Nguyen<sup>7</sup>. In this case, the Singaporean and Australian government's opposing evaluations of the justification of the death sentence were both based on reason. Singaporean society's justification for using the death penalty is drugs' occasional direct responsibility for deaths and the "general degradation of society"<sup>8</sup>. In Australia however, this reasoning is regarded as excessively harsh, as the amount of heroin found on Nguyen would not have killed anyone<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the severity of the punishment is thrown into harsh relief by the 'not guilty' plea, adding an element of doubt to the justification of execution. This example illustrates the pivotal social influences on justification, which also extend to culture, namely, while one culture may consider claim 'A' more strongly justified than claim 'B', another culture may hold the reverse opinion, as in the mining-land rights tussle between large mining companies and local Aboriginal people. Companies regard economic motivations as strong justification for building new mines whereas the local tribes consider this completely unjustified given the cultural and religious significants of these sites. This cultural and societal specificity of justification can be narrowed to an individual level, with people classifying the strength of justifications differently. For example, a science-oriented student may dismiss emotion as a weak justification when evaluating the comparative worth of two artworks. These relativist ideas seriously hinder assessment of the strength of justifications.

The second knowledge issue in the foundation statement is the value of knowledge. Johnson stated that "all knowledge is, of itself of some value"<sup>10</sup>. However, the terms "value" and "we" are ambiguous and interdependent, necessitating an 'unpacking' of these terms. The idea of knowledge's superior value to true

<sup>6</sup> Lagemaat, op. cit., p. 227.

<sup>7</sup> Nguyen was executed for heroin trafficking offences in December, 2005 according to The Age Newspaper Website search.

<sup>8</sup> Compass Television Programme, Justice: Van Nguyen and the Death Penalty, watched in class March 2008.

<sup>9</sup> T. Houey, class discussion, March 2008.

<sup>10</sup> M. Bishop, 'Essay: What is Important in History?', *American Heritage Magazine*, volume 1, December 1967 available at American Heritage Magazine, [http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1967/1/1967\\_1\\_2\\_print.shtml](http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1967/1/1967_1_2_print.shtml), viewed on 20th August 2008.

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belief is defined as a "difference of degree rather than kind"<sup>11</sup>, yet this statement demands comparison within the spectrum of human knowledge. The question is whether knowledge should be valued according its *pragmatic* value, or the more elusive concept of *emotional* value - understanding or expressing the human condition of polarising sensations and uncertainty. The pronoun "we" is also significant: it could denote all humanity, a specific society or an individual. The statement will be considered on each level.

It seems that, on a global scale, the foundation statement is true. For example, in order to produce electricity efficiently, detailed knowledge within the Natural Sciences is required and widely accepted given its justification through reason – scientific and mathematical proofs – and perception – previous experience of its reliability. Despite the limitations of objectivity in science, like subjective selection of evidence<sup>12</sup>, this knowledge is strongly justified and valuable because of its objectivity, in comparison to a generalisation like "*All teenagers suffer teen angst*", which is justified mainly by perception - the knower's limited experience –, and partially by language – the definition of "teen angst". Yet the foundation statement, with its the condition of strong justification for the practical value of knowledge, is refuted by the example of Newtonian physics, which has been disproved, but is used constantly in construction projects and as a contributor to human understanding of the world<sup>13</sup>. The discipline "Foundation of Mathematics" also discusses the arbitrary nature of the paradigms of Mathematics<sup>14</sup>, which is of high pragmatic value.

In international diplomacy, more strongly justified knowledge can be of as much practical value as knowledge typical difficult to justify given its foundation on the less objective ways of knowing: emotion and language<sup>15</sup>. For example, understanding cultural idiosyncrasies is pivotal in business negotiations in China; if you give a business card with the face up, the deal will "*fall through*", as this is considered impolite<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, the controversial contemporary issue of Tibet's autonomy is affected not only by cultural differences in justifying knowledge but by cultural differences in valuing knowledge: the Chinese population was more willing to consider their government's authority as a strong justification of political repression and, considering reassurance of national pride more valuable than a confirmation of democracy in Tibet<sup>17</sup>, took a nationalist stand against pre-Olympic "Free Tibet" protestors.

While there are exceptions to the foundation statement in Mathematics and Sciences, it is contradicted primarily through knowledge experienced on a personal level, primarily in religion and the Arts. Religion, by definition, gives people a moral code and purpose to their lives. Religious belief cannot be justified in a universally acceptable way as it is reliant on faith or, depending on the specific religion and individual, on evidence often

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<sup>11</sup> Pritchard, op. cit., §1.

<sup>12</sup> Lagemaat, op. cit., p. 229.

<sup>13</sup> "The Analysis of Knowledge", January 2006, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/> accessed on 21<sup>st</sup> August 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Emeritus Professor C. A. Hurst, discussion 1<sup>st</sup> August 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Lagemaat, op. cit., p. 151 and p. 50.

<sup>16</sup> T. Houey, class discussion, 7<sup>th</sup> August 2008.

<sup>17</sup> This type of strong language is found in the article "Warning as Tibet Protests Spread", *The Australian*, 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2008.

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regarded as far-fetched by sceptics, like the healing of the sick and visions of the Virgin Mary at the Lourdes shrine<sup>18</sup>. Despite these weak justifications of religious knowledge, throughout history religion has been a contributing factor in countless military and philosophical conflicts, as in the ongoing violence between the Jewish state Israel and Palestinian refugees. Furthermore, the provision of purpose and ethics by religious writings shows the central role and thus very high value of religion despite its weak justifications. For example, my grandfather, a mathematical physicist, values religion highly as a cognitive process in considering ethical behaviour as well as adhering to the 'God of the Gaps' theory<sup>19</sup>. For me, the value of more weakly justified knowledge is relevant in the area of the Arts, being a devoted pianist. Learning music is a multi-faceted process and it is often difficult to describe and quantify the difference – technical and emotional – between two musicians. However, knowledge of music's contrasting emotional effects on us is vital to its appreciation and enjoyment. Music is an integral part of my life making this knowledge highly valuable, though without strong or easily communicable justification.

In my own experience as a knower, as the definition of "we" in the foundation statement narrows, the value of knowledge is less dependent on the strength of its justification. However, this gradation may not exist for less arts-oriented knowers. These ideas support Clodridge's notion that "*the worth and value of knowledge is in proportion to the worth and value of its object*"<sup>20</sup>, when the "worth and value" of the object is defined by the knower or knowers. Although this impedes a cross-disciplinary comparison of the value of knowledge claims, it is vitally important to consider personal, cultural, societal and global evaluations of the worth of different types of knowledge. These are a crucial indicator of character, values and the boundaries – limitations and advantages – of your perspective.

<sup>18</sup> ""Root of all Evil?" Television Series presented by Richard Dawkins: Part I "The God Delusion", broadcast May 20th 2007 as part of religious program Compass, Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Notes from Theory of Knowledge journal were used as a reference point.

<sup>19</sup> Succinctly, this theory argues that the current gaps in human knowledge can be explained by a 'god' figure. "The Story of God" Television Series presented by Prof. Robert Winston: Part III "The God of the Gaps", broadcast April 22nd 2007 as part of religious program Compass, Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Notes from Theory of Knowledge journal were used as a reference point.

<sup>20</sup> This is based on an assumption justification through one or more ways of knowing: Clodridge, 1825 in Lagemaat, op. cit., Chapter "The Nature of Knowledge".