

"Seek simplicity, and distrust it" (Alfred Whitehead). Is this always good advice for a knower?

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"Seek simplicity, and distrust it" (Alfred Whitehead).

The quote above, ironically, in simply five words sums up a possible perspective for a knower – which like all perspectives for the acquisition of knowledge, presents numerous knowledge issues. The most significant of these is whether knowledge itself is a simplification in comprehensible terms of its subject. However intricate or all-encompassing a piece of knowledge is, it is still an explanation of something, condensing the original in order to express it. Knowledge thus is a simplification, fundamentally incapable of being as complex as its subject. Herein lies the difference between a cat in a window, and a photo of a cat in a window. They are the same image, but the former has so much more, or at least different, significance – being perceivable on more levels. This implores us to question why we simplify, what gains or drawbacks we receive from the simplifications we make on a daily basis in order to compartmentalize our world into pieces of knowledge. Even more so, we must wonder whether it is right to distrust simplicity, and whatever the answer, the implications this advice has for a knower ought to be considered.

The question this poses is whether it is possible to simplify anything whilst retaining its full meaning, despite our human tendency to do so. The "Theory of Everything" purports to summarise the entire universe into a collection of set laws. It is built on the principle of reductionism, that higher systems are the sum of their parts, and therefore all can be simplified to the same set of rules. However recent discoveries in mathematics have called this fundamental idea into question, suggesting the "Theory of Everything" with base laws for all situations may simply not exist¹. This exemplifies how simplification can let us bypass underlying assumptions in our thinking that we would have otherwise noticed. Here, by following the simplification that there is one "Theory of Everything", we are assuming reductionism to be true. Science, as an area of knowledge, is full of these kind of simplifications and resultant issues, but my own experience in IGCSE Chemistry has shown me their apparent necessity. We were taught a simplification of atomic magnetism that was effectively untrue, but nevertheless made sense of the basic chemistry topics we were studying. To distrust this simplification would have been reasonable given these circumstances, yet it served a valuable purpose in allowing me to grasp the concept of atomic magnetism affecting related systems. If knowledge is a simplification, as seen in the above example, it therefore reduces the depth of complexity – yet sometimes promotes our understanding of the whole, making it useful. But this simplified knowledge can mean something different to its original counterpart, and perhaps this is due to reason's dominance in the sciences as a way of knowing. Theoretically, by engaging our faculties of reason we sidestep the quagmire of emotional involvement – but this itself seems a simplistic view. As Tim Sprod points out, we can't possibly simplify our thought processes to block out all illogical impulses². For example, in the event of an earthquake it is safer indoors, but I doubt that seeing my family outside whilst standing in the front doorway I would consider my situation logically, ignore emotion, and step inside the shaking building. More significantly, there would seem an inherent flaw in a knower blocking out a way of knowing in order to understand more

¹ Buchanan, Mark. "Why nature can't be reduced to mathematical laws." *New Scientist* October 2008: 12

² Alchin, Nicholas. *Theory of Knowledge*. London: Hodder Murray, 2006, pg 95

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clearly. This illustrates in reason itself how simplification reduces and changes meaning – by narrowing our scope as knowers, we alter our understanding. Evolutionary biology might explain this as instinctual reflex, behaviour formed over generations for survival reasons – simplifying our world so we respond quickly to danger³. Perhaps, as in the Chemistry example, sufficient meaning can be retained in simplification to provide valuable information. However, the issue here, as in all of these cases, is “sufficient”; in all knowledge, in its attempt to condense the world around us, full meaning is invariably lost.

Yet this raises a new point, of the possibility of being able to “know” something, possess a piece of knowledge, without understanding it. This would seem absurd, yet is apparent in our day to day lives. For example, I don’t fully understand how light functions, how it travels, and so on, but I accept unthinkingly that it exists. This perhaps suggests that the act of creating knowledge, of simplifying the world into a distilled rather than full meaning, is necessary for general comprehension. The recent US presidential elections provide a good opportunity to observe and discuss this idea in practice. In the media, the campaigns of both McCain and Obama were often reduced to sound bites; small segments of knowledge, which raised the issue of simplification distorting meaning for a knower. This simplification was a necessity due to the limited time they had to voice their views in their entirety. Yet even in their longest speeches, we do not begin to fully understand their exact opinions. The only way to understand them, and I take “understand” to signify to comprehend every part of them to the level where we could explain their thoughts and predict their actions, would be to spend every moment with them, learning about them. Perhaps then the only way to truly understand someone is to be them and so perceive life as they do, as language, in its transmission of knowledge, is partially responsible for how it is simplified; by condensing a concept into our words we narrow its scope whilst widening its ambiguity. This, in terms of potential presidents as well as for knowledge in general, suggests it would take all of infinity to achieve understanding. The impracticality of this leads me to reason that comprehension is only possible to a point and therefore surely knowledge, detached from understanding, is merely a disengaged fact lacking in substance. But far from denying the possibility of knowing something without understanding it, this idea supports it; for knowledge, arguably, is indeed a disengaged fact – a simplification that in its distillation removes all sense of its subject.

If we agree with this rather stark view, the third issue that arises is when knowledge as a simplification can be trusted. If we trust all knowledge infallibly, however simplistic or overly complex, we are likely to fall into inherent contradictions, generalisations, and even find ourselves seeing opinion as fact. This was seen recently in the Georgia crisis, where in the haste to assign the labels of “oppressor” and “oppressed”, the complexity of the situation was overlooked. The Independent printed an article that referred to armed militias murdering civilians and looting in the wake of the Russian advance, with the Russian troops having “done nothing” to stop them⁴. The logical response appears to be

³ Jensen, Robert A. "Instinct," Microsoft® Encarta® Online Encyclopedia 2008 3 Dec. 2008.
<http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761572794/Instinct.html>

⁴ Sengupta, Kim. "First war, now anarchy as Russian militias run riot." Independent 14 Aug. 2008

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to take away the knowledge that the Georgians are victims of Russian violence. Whether this can be trusted as an accurate portrayal of the event remains to be seen; because this piece of knowledge has been simplified from its subject, it has lost much of its original context, for example Georgian militias attacking South Ossetians⁵. We as knowers are not in a position to discern effectively to what extent this summarises the situation, as we have little of the referencing and depth available in the original. All knowledge, being simplification, has these characteristics which decrease its reliability. In light of this, maybe to distrust all knowledge is not merely advisable, but safest. This particular dilemma is one that is often in the mind of historians in their examination of sources, or historical knowledge. From their perspective, blanket distrust is inefficient, as is its opposite; both involving closing down avenues of possibility. Instead, the line is usually taken that, as historical knowledge is by nature a narrow simplification confined to a single perspective, it is best to verify it with others; valuable in numbers if not singularly. To demand distrust of knowledge merely because it is a simplification seems unnecessary as it makes progress difficult; rather, knowledge should garner equal amounts of trust and distrust in its having value to the knower. For even the unreliable can teach something; the concentration on Russian violence in the news perhaps illustrates Western support for Georgia rather than lack of aggression on her part. Instead of distrusting simplicity, we should perhaps distrust it as the incontrovertible truth, whilst trusting its value to our repertoire of knowledge.

All of the discussion above possesses the inherent flaw of its subject matter, in that it is undoubtedly a simplification of the truth. Perhaps this best portrays the sizeable implications that the advice in the opening quote has for a knower – in that simplicity is inescapable, in its inevitably due to human nature, and its necessity due to the constraints of comprehension. However, by questioning the sense of when knowledge should be trusted given its simplification, some sense of order was brought to the debate; having established why we simplify the world around us, it was possible to inquire whether distrust of this simplification was advisable. The conclusion from this is that though knowledge as a simplification has many drawbacks, it also has numerous positive points. As such, there is as much to be gained from trusting it as distrusting it, and indeed the best part of the advice from Whitehead is "seek simplicity" – seek knowledge. Paradoxically though, this is a simplification too which calls into question if it can be trusted, and this raises the final question of whether anything is always or ever good advice for a knower.

⁵ AP and Reuters. "Ossetian militias 'looting Georgian villages.'" Independent 13 Aug. 2008

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