

“There are no absolute distinctions between what is true and what is false”. Discuss this claim.

Theory of Knowledge Essay

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I am a 17 year old girl. I like summer and music. The laptop on which I typed this essay exists. Water is wet and ice is cold. The title of the essay suggests that I should question those statements and that they are not absolutely true. Does that mean that what I feel, touch and see is not the reality or that we are not able to tell if something is true? The title contains an assumption that truth and falsehood are total antimonies and that there are no "grey zones". I think that, since the world does not function in a binary system, where something is either a 0 or a 1, the main knowledge issue related to the title is: if there is no absolute truth, can partial truths function as well as if they were absolute?

'Absolute' is defined in many ways, as something "complete; perfect; unmixed"¹ or "not mixed or adulterated; pure"². For me an 'absolute distinction' in this context means a fixed 'borderline' dividing what is true and what is false without leaving any space for in-between "grey zones". The discussion on the existence of an 'absolute distinction' between what is true and what is not is even more difficult, as there is no set definition of truth. There are three broadly recognized theories of truth: the correspondence theory, where something is true because it corresponds to the reality: "Water is wet"; the coherence theory, where a statement is considered true if it 'fits' with other things we know are true: "It is true that francium will react very vigorously with water, as all other Group 1 elements do so"; and the pragmatic theory: "it is true that I like music because I enjoy it, it "works" for me".

When looking for answers in the natural sciences, the scientific method is used to ensure objectivity. The steps of observing a phenomenon, forming a hypothesis, collecting results and coming to a conclusion about it do not necessarily deal with "Ding an sich"³, the thing itself. To make an observation, we use both our perception and reasoning. Paradoxically, those two Ways of Knowing also limit us. Our senses, the means through which we perceive the world, are limited; for example, that we do not hear certain range of sounds, which other animals do hear. Our brain also does not always give us the real image of the world; it can 'play tricks' on us, as in case of optical illusions and 'fills in' gaps, such as the blind spot, with a 'matching' image. Our reasoning is limited by our background, age, and other factors, including the human tendency to look for patterns, which we sometimes see where they do not exist.

¹ Hornby, Gatenby, Wakefield

² Dictionary.com

³ Dictionary and Thesaurus - Merriam-Webster Online.

Our physical paradigm also tremendously influences our ability to observe. Let us consider the generalization that ‘all hollies (an evergreen plant) have green leaves’. We want to test whether it corresponds to reality, but even collecting all the plants and checking their colour would only give us an answer as to how we **see** the leaves of the plant. Living on planet Earth, makes us consider white light emitted by the Sun (our main source of light) to be ‘normal’; the reason for the leaves of holly to look green is that the green light (being a part of the white light) is reflected from chlorophyll (green pigment in plants). However, if sunlight was not white and would not contain green light at all, the leaves of the plant would look black. This different appearance of the plant does not mean that either of the colours is, or is not, the true colour of the leaves of the plant. Therefore, even though the statement about the leaves is true according to the correspondence theory of truth, this conclusion can be drawn only if we specify that it corresponds to our picture of the reality and not simply ‘reality’. Even though there are weaknesses to the scientific method, it is the best tool of objectivity available to us and things such as medicine cure sicknesses, despite being based on human discovery and the imperfect scientific method.

Observation, based on correspondence theory of truth, is the first step to most scientific discoveries. Most of them also ‘match’, are coherent, with things known previously. Scientific breakthroughs, like Fleming’s discovery of *Penicillium notatum* (bacteria producing penicillin)⁴, are exceptional as they do not necessarily ‘fit into’ previously set rules of science and were discovered ‘by accident’. According to those criteria one could say that the Pygmies, who believe that the god Saranga⁵, not the difference in pressure between different masses of air cause rain and storm, are correct. This belief “works” for them, thus is also a pragmatic truth; however, it is crucial to recognise it “works” within the paradigm they live in. The combination of ages of observations and ‘reading of nature’ and the religion of the Pygmies makes this explanation of the weather phenomena logical for them. For me, growing up learning about satellite pictures and meteorology, the explanation of the Pygmies does not seem logical. What one considers the truth depends on the paradigm one lives and functions in, but also emphasizes how the ability to make observations changes with technological discoveries (e.g. satellites) and how it is affected by different filters.

⁴ *The Scientific Method, Science, Research and Experiments.*

⁵ *Google Books(Popular Mechanics)*

Plato explained our inability to see the 'real' world through an allegory of the cave⁶, according to which we do not perceive the real world but just the 'shadows' of what is really happening. Even though we see the true 'shadows' does not mean that we see the real world. I understand this as putting much more emphasis on the reasoning part of making observations, as the shadows must have be interpreted by us in our heads.

Mathematics is the only Area of Knowledge that offers objectivity, and hence can be said to give true answers. It is unaffected by cultural paradigms and its set rules, axioms, are self-evident and always true. Whether regardless one comes from France or China, it is possible to draw a circle with a given centre and trough a given point (one of Euclid five axioms)⁷. Those man-made rules make it possible to determine whether a mathematical statement is true or false, as there are fixed standards against which the validity of the statement can be verified. However, even Mathematics can be a subject to paradigm shift. The ideas of Riemann⁸ shook the mathematical world and stated that the Euclidian axioms, crucial when deductively reasoning new theorems, worked only in certain 'conditions', that is on a flat surface.

Art is 'just' a reflection of the way the artist perceives the world but, as it evokes emotional responses from the audience and is produced with true emotions and intentions, it is pragmatically true. Art is an expression of personal emotions meaning that in the process of creation it is totally subjective. I can identify a married couple on The Arnolfini Portrait⁹, even though the painting is a two dimensional picture on canvas and not flesh and blood. Although the characters are a bit distorted, I can recognize Jan van Eyck painted a picture of a couple, hence it is pragmatically true.

Paradoxically, art, the Area of Knowledge where personal knowledge and taste play the biggest part, is also most closely linked to the 'absolute truth', given it is a pragmatic truth. Although in Shakespeare's Hamlet the protagonist played on stage is fiction, he has real-life character traits: he is confused, hurt and plots revenge. Fiction is literature which can be identified by us and thus is 'true'. It can also, like other arts, be interpreted in different ways. For me the poem The Road Not Taken¹⁰ by Robert Frost is about making a decision which path in life to follow, but for a person of a different background and age it could mean something entirely different, which would not mean that either of us was wrong. In

⁶ Cohen

⁷ Van De Lagemaat, 190

⁸ Van De Lagemaat, 204

⁹ Hughes

¹⁰ Bartleby.com: Great Books Online -- Quotes, Poems, Novels, Classics and Hundreds More.

conclusion art can be considered as another Area of Knowledge which supports the claim that there is no absolute distinction between what is true and what is false, as the absence of one uniform and clear definition of truth makes it impossible to distinguish between what is true and what is false.

To conclude, I believe that for us humans, it is impossible to see the absolute distinctions between the truth and falsehood, even if it exists: we do not have the ability to perceive the reality in its actual form. As in Plato's cave, we see and interpret only the 'shadows' of the real world. We say that things are true or false based upon whether or not they "work", not only in a pragmatic sense but whether they correspond to reality or are coherent with other things we assume to be true, even if strictly speaking they fall into the "grey zone". This ability to 'work', be it a plane's 'ability' to fly, being able to cure diseases, or understanding human nature through art, is what counts for us on everyday basis. Since we have no way to leave the 'cave' of our bodies and minds, and see the real world, we must embrace the 'shadows' and consider them our truth, despite its infinite "grey zones".



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