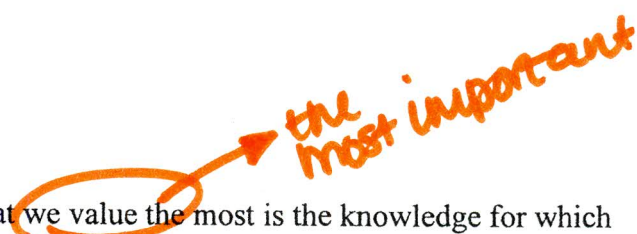


THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE ESSAY

(ESSAY TOPIC 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?"



Richmond Secondary School (0322)
Paige Pei Qiong Qin (0322-075)
Word Count: 1596

Individuals, or the collective “we” often cherish certain knowledge: the history of the city we grew up in, a favourite grandma’s recipe, or a piece of elegant mathematical proof. The value of knowledge derives from its influence upon our understanding of the world or its contribution toward knowers’ perspectives. As suggested in this quote, how we assess knowledge is directly correlated to the justifications we, as knowers, are able to provide. This statement describes a phenomenon where the most valued knowledge is supported by the strongest justifications. However, the nature of justifications is much dependent upon the areas of knowledge and ways of knowing involved, which deem their strength difficult to determine. The notion, therefore, is only partially applicable.

The “we” in the quote could refer to many things. The subjects of “we” determine the type of justifications and often the areas of knowledge involved. “We” could refer to members of a specific community. Knowledge is, therefore, a group pursuit with a mutual set of established values. For example, as members of Green Team, we try to do our share of protecting the earth’s natural habitats. Our values and actions stem from the belief of the devastating impact global warming is able to exert on the planet. This air of impending doom originated from Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth*, which speaks of the urgency in taking action. However, U.S. Republican government officials have denied the possibility of man-made global warming using data from a selected group of scientists. With the officials’ focus on national economy and corporate interests, one cannot distinguish whether their justifications are valid scientific conclusions or simply excuses for their exploitation of the environment. Thus, the mere act of choosing to associate oneself with a specific group can influence one’s decision to value certain knowledge over another. Hidden political agendas or pre-existing doctrines make justifications more self-serving than objective. Our value of knowledge, therefore, is much driven by purpose. It’s evident that justifications could be manipulated to protect group interests.

This leads to the question “which comes first, value of knowledge or justification?” The quote suggests that knowers evaluate different bodies of knowledge they perceive and assign them values based their judgments. Thus, stronger justifications lead to more valued knowledge. However, sometimes supreme value upon certain knowledge precedes justifications, which are only thrust upon afterwards by outside sources such as authorities. In this case, the strength of the justifications is pre-determined by the assigned value of the knowledge, or worse, justifications are produced and fabricated to suit the established value. For example, during my years in Beijing, nationalism sprouted everywhere. I was bombarded with propaganda glorifying the country at school, home or even family gatherings. At the time I did not question people’s devotion to the country or to the glorified idealism. Using language as the medium and tool in newspapers, textbooks or radio reports, nationalistic propaganda instilled teachings of the central communist party and the importance of state into each generation. Without having truly tested the justifications, such as the rapid national economic growth or the great victories against the Japanese in WWII, many Chinese people faithfully embraced nationalism, carrying emotion as the “only force of knowledge”. Relying almost solely on the

voice of authorities, knowers even find personal justifications unnecessary. While some argue that this is beneficial for the solidarity of a country since society cannot function cohesively without following a set of leading beliefs, others see it as the absence of critical thinking and an imbalance between the value of knowledge and justifications.

If we take the “we” to include each one of us, the knowledge we value the most is often “private knowledge”, which leads to justifications specific to only individual knowers. For example, I highly prize grandma’s recipe for blueberry muffins. The aroma of home-baked goods brings back all the sweet childhood memories in the tiny village. However, mom values the cooking because it reminds her of grandma’s warm motherly figure. The value of a body of knowledge can be justified in different ways, without one universal standard to judge which version of justification is the “strongest”. Something that one values might be of no significance to another. Thus, the subjectivity inherent in the topic lends itself to an individualized approach in assessing the strength of justifications, unlike the generalizations found in communities represented by the collective “we”.

Not only who “we” are plays a significant role in discussing the validity of this claim but which areas of knowledge we value or how we acquired this knowledge also influence the nature and the role of the justifications. In distinct areas of knowledge, justification can either serve as a proof of the validity of knowledge, or an explanation of the value of knowledge. Thus, the method of justifying, determined by the area of knowledge, directly affects the strength of justifications. For example, in physics class, justifications take in the form of an experiment formulated to verify a relationship—such as a lab using arrows drawn from a bow to test the formula for kinetic energy. In natural sciences, valued knowledge generally refers to a “testable truth”. The strength of justifications lies in the method of determining a statement’s usefulness in describing the real world. In math class, the method of justification consists almost exclusively of a logical proof backed up by reasoning. Mathematical induction, among the techniques employed in a proof, can verify that a given statement holds true for all, therefore eliminating any degree of uncertainty. On the contrary, moral principles in ethics cannot be justified in the same way as laws in science and math. Whether a particular ethical practice is viewed as right or wrong much relies on an individual’s subjective experience. Take the example of hedonism in which desires and pleasures dominate. Not readily embracing the practice, I but largely agree with the notion that the present should be most prized to lead an enjoyable life. However, many elders dismiss hedonism as morally corrupt and wasteful. Because of the hardships he had gone through shortly after WWII, grandpa leads a frugal lifestyle, believing in the virtue to practice thrift. An individual’s age, gender and the social context can become the determining factors in providing justifications for moral beliefs. Nevertheless, one must precaution against the danger in lacking a common meter for moral and ethical beliefs. The idea of “cultural relativism” serves as a prime example of this pitfall, as it embraces all ethical practices as valid. In blurring the distinction between tolerance and indifference, it provides an excuse for justifying certain wrong-doings, negating the validity or

strength of justifications. Nevertheless, justifications in areas such as ethics are less absolute or objective in nature than those in natural sciences or mathematics, but does that necessarily constitute weaker justifications?

As a result of the difference in the nature of justifications, society has placed more emphasis on one type of justification over another. For example, if a cosmetic product is being advertised as “scientifically” proven to delay the effects of aging, more consumers will respond than if the advertisement is to include only testimonies from people who used the product before. Certain notions such as “science is the truth” become so imbedded that one immediately translates certain “type” of justifications to “strong” justifications regardless of the validity of the claims. The above inherent bias in determining the strength of justifications can directly affect the values assigned to different bodies of knowledge, as scientific knowledge tends to be most prized in modern society. The art of advertising also brings forth the issue of “false justifications”, as those frequently employed in commercials. Pseudoscience and other quasi religious beliefs have been used as justifications to support certain knowledge or faith, which has led to extreme behaviours or cultural practices. It calls for a sound judgment on the validity of justifications before choosing to value any knowledge at all.

Ways of knowing, especially language and emotion, too, can interfere with the strength of justification and the value of knowledge. The story of a local blueberry farm’s loss due to seasonal frostbite touched me personally. Standing amongst acres and acres of blueberry field, I felt my heart sink at the sight of clusters of tiny, shriveled blueberries, hanging lifelessly under the mild spring sun. As a youth reporter at the local newspaper, I penned the story quickly, driven by a strong sense of empathy and a belief in community values and heritage. Language in this case, coupled with emotion as the ways of knowing and media of expression, added onto my value in communities without providing any separate objective evidence. People often speak of the harms done when emotion becomes the only mean of justification; however, the statement shares an inherent misunderstanding of how we value knowledge. More often than we realize, individuals are only seeking justifications to the values they place upon knowledge, rather than justifications to the knowledge itself. The intrinsic process of “valuing”, characterized by emotion and perception, is often separate from the reasoning behind formulating justifications from the collection of evidence. After all, can we really provide justifications to the knowledge we claim to value the most? None of us has proven that the earth is round.

Ultimately, two underlying paradoxes exist: “the knowledge that we value the most isn’t necessarily justified most strongly” and “the knowledge with the strongest justification isn’t the knowledge we value the most.” It also raises the question “should justifications alone determine our attitude toward knowledge?” The quote raises an important point linking value to the strength of justification but it’s too broad and absolute. History has seen the perils of practicing supremacy based on unethical justifications, such as the Holocaust when Nazism became most strongly justified in the eyes of Hitler’s stormtroopers. As knowers, we must learn to question the validity and nature of justifications before choosing to value certain knowledge.