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### Knowledge and Belief: Can there be Knowledge?

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#### Abstract

In this brief essay, I endeavor to define knowledge through an analysis of science and art and thence a philosophical quest to determine if knowledge is possible. It was found that science may masquerade as knowledge, although it appears to be a true paradigm. Yet in the form of scientism, it is another myth, another fiction. Similarly, art is only true in the fictional sense, a lie that appears accurate, just as

mimetic resemblance is really only a surface filled with colored paint and makes no true reference to a corresponding reality. In general, belief is to be undermined and one should try to at least tend toward knowledge, fact, reality if we are to survive as a species in an evolutionary sense, rather than belief in personified gods or God and the like.

**Keywords:** Knowledge, Belief, Art, Science, Reality

#### Prelude

“Prevalent attempts to explain alleged differences between the so-called primitive mind and scientific thought has resorted to qualitative differences between the working processes of the mind in both cases, while assuming that the entities which they were studying remained very much the same. If our interpretation is correct, we are led toward a completely different view – namely, that the kind of logic in mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science, and that the difference lies, not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied...the same logical processes operate in myth as in science, and that man has always been thinking equally well; the improvement lies, not in the alleged progress of man’s mind, but in the discovery of new areas to which it may apply its unchanged and unchanging powers” (Levi-Strauss in Bruner 1968:88) <sup>[1]</sup>.

“...that we try to make clear that man is equally human whether he uses a stone axe or a steel one, explain eclipses via astronomy or by spirits, murders with a gun or by the use of magic” (Bruner 1968:88) <sup>[1]</sup>.

#### Introduction

Reflecting on the quotes above, one is left with the following question: If neither science nor mythic thought are not so clearly distinguished, where the former is said to correspond with the truth about the world, with reality, and the latter simply imaginative, yet false, then there is a sense in which what is said to be a matter of fact, is itself part of a mythical system. A paradigm operates as the system of knowledge, yet on closer scrutiny it is neither verifiable nor infallible. There is thus a sense in which all paradigms are mythical and fictional, and progress is not so much the revelation of truth and reality unfolding in the progress of time, as it is simply exchanging one kind of system for another. Such a system is supported by tenants, beliefs, axioms, methods, and there is nothing external to the system by which one can determine its truth and correspondence with the external world. If such is the case, what is meant by knowledge and can we distinguish such from belief itself – belief being defined as necessarily not knowledge, but merely an emotive ascent without justification or at least without being measured according to a rigorous method of verification and proof.

Through an analysis of key areas of human expression, namely language, art, and science, I will argue that there is no knowledge as such, only existing systems of thoughts, that is, a collection of beliefs which are justified accordingly. The point is since all these beliefs have dominated for such extended periods historically, they were accordingly regarded as true and thus the current state of knowledge or the existing paradigm that suffers the same fate. It would seem then knowledge is not possible. I attempt to argue that this is indeed an impasse and suggest an attitude to deal with such Existential nausea, that is, the fact, that truths are temporary and methods not sacrosanct. Just as alternative explanations may be given when solving a murder case, all equally rational or at least rational in relation to a certain kind of conglomerate of thoughts, so there is not necessarily an ultimate paradigm or set of truths one could call knowledge. I would argue positively that this may mean not

simply cultural relativism without any moral compass, but an embracing of many cultures, of new visions and thoughts and the celebration of diversity and inclusivity—apparently what post-modern thought gestured towards.

### **1. Language:**

The power of language lies in its ability to “stand for” or symbolize something else. This may include a reference to things as well as more abstract concepts. The rules of language and the function of various components of either its written or oral formulation allow the user to express anything from a simple imperative: “Please pass me the cup” to more abstract, non-sensory propositional statements like “life is like a wheel—forever moving and yet unchanging”.

The power of language also lies in its ability to state one’s ideas as precisely as possible in order to distinguish between truth and falsehood. This is made possible by making a further distinction between belief and knowledge. The idea that knowledge is “justified true belief” already discerned by Plato may seem ironclad. Yet, for a belief to be justified it must fit into an established system or paradigm and then regarded as knowledge to the extent that it accords with the system taken as a whole. This, however, is not robust, since the very paradigm or system itself may not be true, even if the constituent elements seem all correct when assigned a place within such a system. This is akin to a deluded perception, where each new item of sense is understood as meaning something, yet only in relation to the whole, which being a delusion in the first place, means although it appears justified, it is but another instance of delusion. One might take this metaphor further and maintain that whole epochs are cast under the spell of this or that delusion, that is to say, the prevailing system or paradigm. This view may apply to current worldviews and ways of living.

Language, however, may also be used deceptively; as a blockage to experience, to aesthetic qualities; to the non-verbal; to creative flow and as heralds for great evils, dishonesty and as a prelude to war. The latter is usually augmented by using language to state beliefs and then using it in such a way as to persuade others to agree as such and carry out the design of those who crave power and influence. In fact, it is when beliefs are called knowledge that the real misuse of power may occur, and institutions are used to leverage and wield this power. The bastion of knowledge; the business of education; the so-called civilizing of others and control via the tools (technologies) and soldiers that defend such knowledge—these are all mechanisms by which language in the form of knowledge may become a fanatical fundamentalism, a religion of sorts, where belief and knowledge are not so easily separated or if they are it is only so that the latter can be used as a forceful mobilization of others in the guise of truth, goodness and beauty. In such terms, language itself is the prime mover, the principal medium through which “knowledge” is solidified and passed on.

### **2. Art:**

The non-verbal realm of art was and perhaps still is just as powerful as language in giving form to beliefs and beliefs that are said to be knowledge. Here one has to be careful what one means by “art” in the first place. The concept of art today is perhaps less than 300 years old and coincides with modernist thought and the separation, rationalization,

and methodologies of different disciplines. The idea of the individual artist; of the separation of Church and State; of the progress of knowledge as opposed to traditional faiths and new, creative possibilities is a late development historically.

Art is also an illusion. It creates a portal to a fictional world. It is a lie that appears as truth. It embodies ideas and beliefs through form. The various kinds of art – paintings, sculptures, photographs, installation and so on in the visual arts – are simply different methods and crafts in articulating feelings, ideas, and beliefs through physical embodiment. Beauty is a captivating realm in which attraction lures the viewer into a certain worldview or perception.

The realm of the aesthetic, a realm distinct from knowledge as it is primarily sensory and appeals to instinct and pleasure, cannot be said to consist in knowledge. Its formal coherence is not a sort of propositional or discursive knowledge, but rather the expression of harmony and beauty, though the latter is redefined as new methods and definitions of art and beauty evolve. It appeals to the senses and usually not even the artist knows what it is that is expressed. No longer tied to a pre-modern integration of belief-structure and society, art is an exclusive discipline impervious to life dynamics.

The post-modern loose definition of art and the attempt at interdisciplinary knowledge in fact erodes the very definition of art and everyday life itself can be said to be aesthetic. On the other hand, the institution of art is a robust system of meaning and cultural communication with a distinct theory, praxis, and history. Yet it is not so much the discovery of the substance of the world, of reality, as it is a creation of a new world or at least an imaginative excursion, an interpretation of life rather than any clear notion of life itself. Its methods are not logical perse, but a tacit dimension, a skill, a craft. It is a beautiful sound or a mimetic copy of what is through craft-like skill, rather than mining for the truth in verbal and mathematical terms. It is more concerned with the quality of something than with quantity. Art then is not knowledge of what is, but creation and instinct.

### **3. Science:**

Each epoch, age or generation considers its scientific knowledge to be a sacred understanding and truth about the world. It perceives past “science” as myth or at least primitive and misguided and current states of scientific knowledge as reflecting progress and truth. The idea of the modern scientific method is that man could understand nature without recourse to unseen spirits or gods or even God as such, but rather through the analysis and methods of the scientific method which precludes hidden forces and studies the material itself. Coupled simply with logic, empirical verification, and tools that mine beneath the veneer of what apparently exists, science can discern inherent laws that explain the myriad of phenomena. It can thus generalize so that particulars are explained via general laws and a few fundamental substances.

The success of such a method has given rise to the progress of medicine, technologies and the various natural sciences which can be reduced to physics and chemistry which explain biological processes and entities. This may be further reduced to mathematical analysis and logical inference and deduction. The result is that nature is understood and manipulated without reference to narrative

and myth, nor religion and faith. While one might decry that such an edifice of accumulated and developing knowledge leads to a certain materialism and a sterile, technicist society, it has freed humanity from dogma, falsehoods, and the overwhelming power of nature which in the past dominated mankind.

With the loss of faith-based traditions and what may be termed a magical conception of nature, science and the Enlightenment has led to a certain common and universal set of ideas: humankind are one species, a certain sophisticated animal and share the same DNA with only small differences; all matter is constituted by atoms and vibrational energy; nature can be described as certain mathematical relationships and a great power (atomic energy) is unleashed such that it can be manipulated and controlled by humankind. Furthermore, no matter one's origins such knowledge is open to all and not dependent on tribal affiliation or belief systems but is universal and applicable to all. Research continues unabated and it appears that the mechanism and processes of life will be understood, and this promises great power and the ability to explore the cosmos without limit.

#### **4. Belief:**

Belief is unjustified and often not within the realm of verification. It is not simply subjective, which may have a claim to a kind of knowledge. Rather it is holding to a certain conception even in the face of contrary evidence. Belief is impervious to argument, refuses to be refuted. In this sense it is dogmatic, even tyrannical. It usually comes in the form of received wisdom and may guide whole masses of people for generations, and those that question such belief and cast a skeptical eye have often lost their lives for voicing such so-called dissent. It is usually guarded by authority or in its worst form under the guise of knowledge and wisdom and upheld by powerful institutions who wield control over the great majority.

There is, however, a positive side to belief. To believe in oneself is a positive psychological attribute. This emboldens the self, and one's *will*, to pursue that which is beyond one's reach at a given moment and yet have the courage and fortitude to try to achieve it anyhow. It also enables one to overcome current challenges in that one has the strength and courage to try to find a solution and alleviate current pressures. But all in good measure – too much self-belief may cloud one's objectivity and recognition of the other as well as narrow one's grasp of what may really be true in that self-belief may morph into “whatever I believe is true” or “my opinion is *the* opinion” and so on – and such an attitude is anti-intellectual and dangerous, even destructive. It is self-centered and self-absorbed, so it needs to be tempered with knowledge if it is to be temperate and useful.

#### **5. Knowledge:**

What then is knowledge and is it possible? The fact that a so-called deluded system of thought operates in a logical and interconnected web where each experience or thing is circumscribed or has a place within the system as whole, means that the difference between a deluded system and the accepted (and common) paradigm is simply that: the latter is the accepted one. In fact, those deemed to subscribe to a warped, distorted, deluded worldview are ostracized by society and put into mental institutions as the case may be. Common knowledge deems such individuals dangerous and

mad and in their opposition to common and accepted norms of thought and action and thus they are by dint of the very knowledge of society (led by those in white coats—the esteemed scientists) considered to be doing an act of mercy and hoping to rehabilitate them back to the norms, the accepted wisdom of society. Sounds like the torturous pursuits of religious fanatics who would demand atonement through so-called merciful acts of torture.

Yet is it not conceivable that as in other societies the “mad” are the seers and prophets and hold a deeper knowledge? Or as a corollary: What is considered true, that is, knowledge, is a coherent system and paradigm or cultural manifestation, yet is a mass delusion, just as Marx was won't to say that religion be the opium of the people.

One might also say that while it may appear that facts are facts, there may be a deeper explanation for the whole edifice of knowledge which yet explains all such facts in an even more robust manner and that this knowledge remains unknown. Or one might simply make the observation that in the future science will have evolved to such an extent that the reasons and beliefs we hold today will be considered rather primitive, a narrative akin to mythology.

This rather deconstructive perception does not undermine the fact that it may be fair to say that human civilization is clearly more knowledgeable than in the past, at least in terms of knowing about nature and the general literacy of the population compared to times past. However, the great mass still follows doctrine and dogma and even in the guise of a materialist philosophy in more sophisticated forms of belief. It is thus important to distinguish between knowledge about particulars and beliefs about the universe and life as a totality.

#### **Conclusion**

This brief account calls into question the possibility of knowledge in an ultimate sense. It problematizes an easy distinction between belief and knowledge. Even the edifice of language, art and science is limited by the very medium through which it carves out and perceives or structures reality. One might recall Kant's dividing of the mind and thought into discrete categories such that our knowledge is necessarily human knowledge and not reality the “In Itself” as it were. I also made the claim that there is not necessarily a rigid distinction between myth and enlightened science and our knowledge and culture changes and evolves over time and as such perception is relative to a particular time and place.

Notwithstanding such arguments, it is crucial (I believe) to try to make a distinction between mere belief and knowledge. And I think the best bet is this: belief is not based on reason or at least a logical method of analysis, whereas knowledge is. Now of course even a logical system has axioms at its base and root; however, the difference lies in how much of jump or flight of fancy it is from the axioms to a system of logical argument. For example: If I say there is a benevolent God that causes the movement of all things and then proceed from there to explain all movement as that of the movements of such a Being, I have not really explained all such movements or understood them in any way. If I rather begin with the axiom: The movement of things are caused by the relative energy levels of that thing and define energy has the ability to exert a force, then I can infer that the stuff of the world moves in accordance with such an energy quotient and explain plants and animals in

myriad detail accordingly. In such terms, the latter explanation is more useful and appears to deliver a more robust set of beliefs that tend to knowledge.

### **References**

1. Bruner JS. Towards a Theory of Instruction. Norton and Co: New York, 1968.