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Are some ways of knowing more likely
than others to lead to truth?

1,597 words

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“Ethical axioms are found and tested not very differently from the axioms of science. Truth is what stands the test of experience.”¹ In an academic experience the most fulfilling moment is the acquirement of truths, within the historical, scientific, literary or mathematical context which brings one closer to the Truth-the existential facts, the ultimate reality, the answer to why we are here. In the search for knowledge there is an underlying quest for certainty which we strive for through language, perception, reason and emotion. However in finding truth, one must ask whether language hides or reveals truth, if we can trust our perception, if truth can be reasoned coherently and consistently or if a deep emotion suggests truth.

Language is a conventional code of symbols that allows a sender to formulate a message that can be understood by a receiver² who then derives a meaning either through finding a definition or associating an image with it. However, it is much easier to define or imagine a square compared to ‘love’ and such vagueness is an intrinsic problem in language and can be manipulated for political purposes. Such are the acts of Islamic fundamentalists who interpret the word “jihad” to mean “holy war” when it actually means “struggle.” Yet their manipulations of words recruit the vulnerable youth to terrorism which demonstrates the fallacy of words which are affected by interpretation based partially on personal experience and cultural background.

Although an appropriate interpretation can be retrieved according to the context, this personal example shows how interpretation creates uncertainty. While visiting Mecca, Saudi Arabia I found the Koranic verses, (in English) that dealt with wearing the veil. After consulting two translations of which one said, “Let them wear their head-

¹ Albert Einstein (1879 - 1955), German-born U.S. physicist

² Robin A. Lister, lecture on ‘Language as a way of knowing’, 07.11.06

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coverings” and the other said, “Let them guard their modesty,” I covered my hair and wore a knee length coat as this is what I interpreted as “modesty.” However, a local woman on the streets rebuked me for breaching Islamic law. In this case, language fell pray to cultural interpretation and distorted religious truth. One can go further to say that religious truth lies beyond language, for faith cannot be constructed into words.

However, it is this ambiguity in language that gives language its richness providing the art of poetry which can lead to existential Truth. Keats’ ‘Ode to Autumn’ provides a different perspective on death for the metaphor of the “maturing sun” or the richness in autumnal decay takes us beyond everyday truths but exercises our faculties in communicating a Truth of our existence: death. If Keats gives one angle on the reality of death then according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis³ of linguistic determinism, in a different language one has access to a different reality, concluding that full reality can never be achieved by all.

However, certain emotions cannot be expressed in words shows that the thought precedes the word and therefore language does not determine, but may influence our thoughts as we grow older and language and cognition become more interdependent.⁴ If Truth is beyond words then the gap between language and reality is unbridgeable for unique interpretations will remain an obstacle. However, if we have defined reality to be as such then it is language that brought us to that definition. Moreover, language is paramount because without the structure of language what we see as reality breaks down for the truth may be perceived, reasoned or felt but without matching it to words,

³ The hypothesis that argues that language determines our experience of reality and linguistic determinism says that language determines thought.

⁴ *Introducing Psychology, Thinking and Knowing*, Bridget Giles, The Brown Reference Group plc, London, 2002, p135

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communication and expression are inexistent and collectively we have not moved closer to the Truth.

Perception deals with finding truths through the use of our senses yet they are limited because of interpretation and experience. Our empirical abilities do not lead us to the truth because as humans our senses will go through a process that interprets the information forbidding us to see the raw reality while the subconscious act of selective perception suggests that perception cannot provide us truth because we see what we want to see; we have no access to full 'reality'. Our senses are tinted by beliefs and prejudices. Information we received will be processed in a manner that harmonizes with our paradigms. For example, I took a painting of my house to a Tanzanian village where one girl did not see the painting as a real representation of a house but a flat drawing. She had always lived in a hut and never experienced angular buildings and therefore was not fooled by a visual trick. Similarly the painting below says "This is not a pipe" for it cannot be used as a pipe and the only reason we accept it is a pipe is because it corresponds to our experience of pipes.

Due to copyright reasons, this image has been removed.

Ceci n'est pas une pipe by René Magritte

⁵ Magritte, René François Ghislain (1898-1967), Belgian surrealist painter

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Colour is the interaction between the eye and the object and therefore is an experience of the mind. Similarly, I hear the sound of the car, the vibrations in the air and the “vroom.” But if I were not present then all that would be heard are the vibrations, therefore sound is an experience of the mind. Therefore is reality void of colour or sound? This begs the question of whether there is any truth out there, independent of our experience and will we ever have access to it? However, the credibility of stating “this pen is blue” is increased if a greater number of people agree to it. Although in searching for truths there are ways to overcome empirical limitations, in finding the Truth of an independent existing reality, perception may be of little importance.

In science truths are found by means of logic:

All good math students go to good universities.

I am a good math student.

I will go to a good university.

This logical deduction is true and valid if only the premises are true. The truth of the first premise is found through logical induction:

Sam, Phoenix and Pedro are good mathematicians who go to good universities.

Therefore, *all* good math students go to good universities.

Although deduction seems to preserve truth as it avoids generalizations, the first premise in a deductive argument is based on induction which makes a generalization from limited evidence. Therefore, the fundamental laws of logic are self-contradictory.⁶

⁶ *Theory of Knowledge for the IB diploma*, Richard van de Lagemaat, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p134

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Scientific truth is obtained in such a way where the results of experiments lead to a general conclusion from which theories are constructed. Karl Popper⁷ said that to prove scientific theory one must attempt to falsify them for science is a statistical probability rather than a truth because the laws of science are dynamic and new theories force the reassessment of scientific fact. For example, Einstein advanced Newton's theory not by proving him wrong but by considering things Newton did not like speeds extremely close to the speed of light⁸.

Although scientific truths may seem to be the most rational, the process through which they are reasoned is contradictory while their only justification is consistency and reliance on past experience. However, being trapped in a prison of consistency risks a passive nature where the regularity of the laws of nature remains unquestioned. Moreover, science is not as rational as it seems because some theories have come to scientists in moments of irrationality like the famous Archimedes principle of fluid displacement.

Emotions may increase the likelihood of selective perception, fallacious reasoning and manipulative language however emotions in themselves are uncoloured by perception or distorted by language or reason and are therefore raw and perhaps unbiased when finding the truth. Literature, such as 'The Siege' by Helen Dunmore taught me many historical truths of Stalinist Russia by appealing to my emotions. However, emotions may turn out to be a prejudice like Dunmore's prejudice towards USSR politics. Although emotion should not be dismissed in searching for the Truth as they provide intellectual passion while elemental beliefs are matters of intuition, strong emotions risk

⁷ Popper, Sir Karl Raimund (1902-1994), Austrian-born British philosopher of science, known for his theory of scientific method and for the falsification principle. 1993-2003 Microsoft Encarta.

⁸ Theory of Knowledge, Nicholas Alchin, Hodder Murray, London, 2006, p25

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the rationalizing of pre-existing prejudices. Therefore, emotion alone does not guarantee truth and perhaps needs to work together with reason in order to eliminate any prejudice.

In the quest for truth, language, reason, perception and emotion are all limited. When knowledge is gained from any of these ways it corresponds to our defined reality or it is coherent or pragmatic. Despite this, the truth is still not guaranteed for our senses do not give us a reality independent of our experience, language can be coherent to promote falsities, a belief based on emotion does not imply truth and reasoned mathematics and science cannot be permanently pragmatic if it is continually evolving.

In deciding upon the truth, some believe certain truths to be absolute where we risk dogmatism and others believe truth to be relative where we risk the notion that there is no truth. However, if the truth is “out there” then the implication is: the more perspectives we have of the different ways of knowing, the closer we get to the truth. If we take all perceptions into account then a collective objective angle brings the truth closer. If we study the use of language and a foreign language to give a different angle to reality or compare an emotion to another’s in the same context, then perhaps the truth seems nearer. If we explore how intellectual faculties like philosophers, mathematicians, historians and writers have reasoned their conclusions and compare it to our own then reasoning perhaps the truth is a step closer. In taking all these into account, perhaps, the fallacy in each way of knowing is reduced and collectively we have pushed the boundaries of knowledge further to understand the subject-specific truths and have moved closer to the Truth which can only ever be conveyed through language.

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