

May 09

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To what extent would you agree with this claim?

Júlia Schvarcová, The British International School Bratislava

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The British International School Bratislava

Candidate name: Julia Schvarcova

Candidate number: 003503-004

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"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?

If we value the most the knowledge for which we can provide the strongest justifications, then the value of the knowledge we have depends on the justifications provided for it – what we perceive as strong and weak justifications. There is hardly any general clue for what is a strong justification. In my opinion, we can support with strong justifications anything that we strongly believe in, or want to believe in. Meaning it is rather the other way around – 'we can provide the strongest justifications for the knowledge we value the most'. I do not disagree completely with the statement and I admit it might be true in some cases. However, I do not think this statement necessarily defines the truth about the value of our knowledge, and I think each one of us can only hardly distinguish between the cases when the value of the knowledge determines the justifications for it and when the justifications determine the value of the knowledge.

There are two important distinctions to be made before coming to any conclusions. The first one is between the knowledge that we 'value the most' and the knowledge that we want to believe the most. It is important to make this distinction as it closely links to the justifications we can provide for it.¹ The second distinction to be made is between strong and weak justifications, as these may vary with 'general' perception of what is a justification. Examples can be observed in a countless number of areas such as history, business, and life itself in particular.

Firstly, the distinction between the knowledge that we 'value the most' and the knowledge that we want to believe the most needs to be made. The knowledge that we value the most is that which is of a great importance to us. This does not necessarily mean we have the strongest justifications for it, an example is the

¹ It is quite common for us humans to best justify what we truly believe in and hence come to not always entirely balanced conclusions.

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faith in God. Although there is little justification for God's existence, some people tend to value the knowledge they have about their religion the most, because it is of the greatest importance to them. Also the knowledge that comes from our own experience is not always the knowledge with the strongest justifications, yet we value it the most as it comes from our life and enriches what we know with an essence of the 'realness'; such as is my belief that the IB Programme has prepared me for the university better than anything else would have – although I do not have any proof for it I firmly believe it is true. On the contrary, there is the knowledge for which we might even have no evidence or justification at all. Yet if we want to believe in it we are able to find or *invent* the justifications for it. It is the knowledge that we seek to have; it is the beliefs turned into the knowledge. Once again, religious beliefs are a good example of the knowledge that we want to believe in, however weak the justifications for it might be. It is when a belief is so strong it does not need any evidence to be perceived as valuable knowledge; when we value the knowledge we have about what we want to believe in, despite the lack of evidence for it. Sometimes even disregarding the obvious unreliability of the evidence, as long as it provides at least some sort of justification. In relationships and in love this is often the case of trust; when we love someone we want to believe in that person and often find ourselves trusting someone despite apparent evidence for his/her untrustworthiness.

Secondly, another important distinction is that between strong and weak justifications. It is a complicated issue, as this distinction varies and depends on many interconnected factors. First of all, it depends on the perception of what is weak and strong justification; or what is a justification at all. Possible definition of a justification might be 'a reason why something is correct and right'. However, in this meaning we could provide much more sufficient justifications than actual evidence for the knowledge. To continue in the example of the faith in God, it is easier to find justifications for beliefs and the knowledge based on these beliefs,

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than to actually provide an evidence for this knowledge.² When it comes to evaluating the strength of these justifications, the faith in God would lack the evidence to support these justifications, or at least the justifications would not be very strong. That is supposing a strong justification needs undeniable or even tangible proof in its support. The strength of a justification is quite a relative matter; what is a stronger justification when it comes to, for example, 'medical miracles'? Is it a (personal) experience or a scientific proof? For infertile women, their inability to conceive a baby is scientifically justified, yet there are cases when infertile woman gave birth to a healthy baby without medical intervention.³ There is also 'alternative medicine' and its successful treatments, which lack scientific proof, yet sometimes seem to be just as helpful, or even more, as traditional medicine. Ultimately, there is hardly a better example of beliefs turned knowledge without *strong* justifications (or evidence, for that matter) than placebo effect.⁴

The value of the knowledge we have and a critical approach to its justifications may be well observed in history. In fact, evaluation of justifications in history is extremely important for historians in determining conclusions about the past and in its interpretation. The distinction between weak and strong evidence is crucial and therefore attention is paid to evaluate the evidence from every angle. In this process, the origin of evidence is very important, but might be misleading in terms of its value. While oral history is very valuable and useful, it has its limitations, such as that it is biased and does not always provide necessary historical facts or these might be slightly incorrect due to personal involvement in the event. But evidence such as oral history also provides historians with a personal insight into the event and their value is great in terms

² An example would be a belief in that when we pray for something to happen, and it actually happens, we thank God for it. We justify our belief in God's divine power when our prayers come true.

³ MIND BODY INSTITUTE. 2000. *Mind body infertility*. [online]. [Accessed 28 December 2008]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://www.mindbodyinfertility.com/supporting-research.html>

⁴ "The placebo effect is the measurable, observable, or felt improvement in health or behavior not attributable to a medication or invasive treatment that has been administered." SKEPDIC. 2008. *Placebo effect*. [online]. [Accessed 27 January 2009]. Available from World Wide Web: <http://skepdic.com/placebo.html>

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of emotional experience. For example, the knowledge available about Nicholas Winton's motivation to save the Jewish children during the WWII would not even exist without oral history, because it was not in any written accounts, nor in any statistics, but was provided only by himself.⁵ On the contrary, there are statistics and numbers, from which a historian can draw conclusions, and which show unbiased facts about the past. These are very limited in their content, and although might show an unbiased account of what happened in the past, it does not necessarily mean these are balanced accounts for two reasons. Firstly, mere facts cannot provide us with enough material for reconstruction of the history but can only offer a good basis. Secondly, even these facts might be biased, depending on their origin – statistics provided by the government of the Soviet Union during the Cold War would only show the USSR's interpretation of the truth. After all, "no document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even he himself thought he thought."⁶

The strength of the justifications is not always a decisive factor in many areas of life, as it might be well seen in business decision making. They say 'no risk no gain', and this seems to be true in business, as sometimes for the business managers it is best to rely on their intuition⁷ and 'business instincts', rather than on the knowledge they have. Then, when making decisions based on intangible reasons, their 'belief' in what is the best decision for the business does not need strong justifications in its support. Or people might find that when they truly believe in something, they do find justifications strong enough for it. If they do,

⁵ Nicholas Winton saved 669 Jewish children from the horrors of the WWII. His motivation is a matter of great discussions and he did not reveal his achievements until his wife found out about them. I began to appreciate value of oral history only after I was involved in the Bratislava History Project, where I was given the opportunity to see oral history in making and be a part of it. Interviewing some 'Winton's children' and Winton himself was an irreplaceable experience, which has taught me to appreciate value of personal accounts much more. Further information about Nicholas Winton and The Bratislava History Project: <http://www.internationalschoolhistory.net/BHP/index.htm>

⁶ Carr, E.H. 1961. *What is History?* Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.16

⁷ (e.g. an unexplainable feeling that something is right)

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does it make their knowledge about the issue the most valuable? Only unlikely, but it does justify their decision and satisfies their subconscious.

It is our subconscious which is one of the most important factors in determining the value of the knowledge, if not the most important of all; and which links to our personal life experiences. A great proportion of our knowledge is based on our own experience, whether deliberately or subconsciously. As experiences we have help in shaping who we are, it is safe to say we place great value on these experiences, and consequently on the knowledge we gain from them. But then, is our own experience good enough justification? It depends on what value we place upon it. If it is important enough for us, I believe we are able to satisfyingly justify the knowledge we gain from any experience. Then the strength of the justifications becomes irrelevant and the value of the knowledge we have, from our own experience in this case, determines the strength of the justifications we can provide for it.

In my personal opinion we often value the knowledge for which we do not have any strong justifications even more than the knowledge for which we can provide the best justifications. Whether it is knowledge that comes from our own experience, or it is our beliefs that become the knowledge, the strength of the justifications is not always a decisive factor.

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