

The importance of  
doubt in gaining  
knowledge  
philosophy essay



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Doubt always arises when we have lacking of knowledge and information about certain things or because our understanding has been influenced by others. It is caused by element of sceptism. " Some philosophers claim that not only should we not trust any knowledge we obtain through our senses, but that it is impossible to be sure of anything." An easy example is when I was in class, listening to the lesson given by the teacher. There must be some of the information given that made me feel doubtful and uncertain. As for that, I need to refer books and teachers in order to gain the right answer more understanding toward it. Surely, this closely relates to the Persian Proverb, which said that " Doubt is the key to knowledge". Doubt is defined as the " feeling of uncertainty and skeptics or lack of conviction". It happens when we have the feeling of " questioning the truth of facts" of certain things. Meanwhile key is " a thing that provides access to something". In this context, the word key is used to represent a point that can help to expand some ideas and understanding. As for that, from my point of views, this Persian Proverb reflects the meaning of the feeling of uncertainty will trigger curiosity and may lead to the expansion of ideas and opinions of certain facts, which in the end will lead to expansion of knowledge. This essay will analyse how doubt help in the expansion of two area of knowledge which are science and history.

New discoveries about ancient artifacts are being discovered and interpreted from time to time, which somehow lead to misunderstanding and confusion towards certain facts. Therefore, how does doubt has any relation in creating all these misunderstanding and confusion? Since we will never be able to re-

run the past, this will trigger a feeling of uncertainties or doubt towards the events that has happened in the past. According to Peter Berger,

“ The past is malleable and flexible, changing as our recollection interprets and re-explains what has happened.”

For instance, there have been controversies and disagreements about the existence of earliest human theory. ‘ International theory claimed the existence of earliest human was found in Java, Africa and China for about 1. 8 millions years ago.’ ‘ However, a group of archeologist from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) has come out with new theory. In their study, they have discovered new evidence that proves the earliest human has actually existed around 1. 83 millions years ago in Bukit Bunuh, Lenggong, Perak, Malaysia.’ Therefore, which one of the theories is true? This elicits doubt and uncertain feeling which acquiring us to find more information in order to gain correct facts. In deeper research, archeologist had found out that there was meteorite destruction occurred in Bukit Bunuh, which caused changes in the stone structure there. ‘ New idea has been generated in which it is possible that there was a migration of the hominids in Bukit Bunuh to Java due to the meteorite destruction.’ From this, we can see that doubt helps in expanding the knowledge, basically in history, as we found deeper information about the mobility of the existence of human in earlier centuries. This information will then assist the historian to interpret the evidence and study about the origin of human existence and thus help us to understand why and how do we exist in this world.

However, doubt can only help to expand knowledge among a group of people with the common interest and background. This new theory may be only accepted by Malaysian historian, and may be not by historian in other regions. As we all know, history is areas of knowledge that based on interpretations of the fact. The reliability of the facts can somehow be doubtful and uncertain since the interpretations had been influenced by perception, emotion, language and logic. With reference to the previous example, the differences in theory might be caused by the differences in radiometric method used in dating the discovered artifacts and result in the anomalies in the expected age of geological period of the artifacts. Thus archeologists will tend to accept theory based on method used that they believe was most accurate to date the artifacts and so affects interpretations of the facts. Knowledge will only expand according to their beliefs and this will lead to more controversies and disagreements. Plus, there is also some kind of situation in which doubt only does not help in expanding knowledge, especially towards society. They have some doubt towards it, but then since they have heard other facts that contradict with this fact, it becomes a controversy. Therefore, they will accept facts which they think have stronger evidences and most reliable based on their previous knowledge. Hence, it is clear that “doubt is the key to knowledge” can only be experienced by people with the same personal relation to the subject, but then doubt will only remain unsolved towards common people who do not have enough knowledge.

In science, we can clearly see the expansion of knowledge through medicine by looking at new treatments of diseases being discovered from time to

time. The complexity of human body triggers curiosity and doubt which plays an important role in the process of expansion of medicine. As we all know, the use of plants as remedies has been practiced long time ago. Even today, traditional treatment using herbal plants can give the same effect as modern treatment, and in fact it can be more effective. As an example, the use of hibiscus leaves solely to cure fever especially by people in rural area has shown the better effectiveness than modern treatments which prescription of modern medical that contains a lot of chemical contents. ' This fact and practice has triggered curiosity and doubt among both medical doctors and traditional practitioners where both were doubtful and sceptical about the effectiveness, possible side effects and ethical standard of treatments of one another.' Questions like ' which treatment shows better effectiveness?', ' which treatment has better safety?'etc popped out in their mind. This has also become a controversy and thus forces relevant assess by both sides on the argument.

Since " science is looking for certainty", scientist had taken their initiatives to study about both treatments, and used this opportunity to create more medicine that can cure a vast range of diseases. As a result, it is proven that traditional practice using herbal plant does bring a lot of benefits in medicine. Therefore, today, there are many medicines that being produced on the basis of herbal plant extract. For instance, based on my past experience in doing biology extended essay, the use of betal extract in feminine wash to prevent and treat vaginal infections has been practiced prominently and marketed extensively. This brings out a paradigm shift in medical area, in which diseases can be treated in many different ways, and

not only restricted to modern or traditional treatment only. Plus, patients also can have greater choices in treating their diseases and the probability of getting cured is increasing. This is clearly shown the result of the expansion of knowledge in medicine initiated by doubt.

Nevertheless, there is also some area in health option that we can only doubt, but the expansion of knowledge can never be achieved since it deals with paranormal. For example, in Malaysia, one which once ago has been famously known with traditional practitioners known as 'bomoh'. They were said to use intermediary unseen creature to cure diseases. This kind of treatment cannot be proven scientifically. The truth of this practice remains secrete, since 'bomoh' will only keep this secret to themselves. There are incidences in which the patients treated by this treatment claimed that they have feeling of being followed by unseen creature and they become emotionally unstable. As for that, it is doubtful here about the safety of this treatment. Therefore, this shows that doubt can only help in expansion of knowledge in when the subjects can be proven scientifically.

To conclude, it seems to us that this Persian Proverb is true: "Doubt is the key to knowledge". New facts and knowledge can be discovered as a result of doubt. Human tends to shapes the new facts according to their perception, emotion, reason and knowledge; and this will bring out curiosity and feeling of uncertainty towards the facts. The feeling of uncertainty towards the facts encourages human to somehow find evidences about their validity, and also to gain more and deeper information about them. This situation keeps repeating from time to time, and as the result of it,

knowledge also keeps expanding. However, due to human mind limitation,  
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there are still some areas that we cannot have any doubt or we can only doubt but the truth remains secrete, thus it cannot help in expanding the knowledge.