

Sample critical thinking on midterm essay, 1.5 pages relating knowledge and belie...

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Midterm Essay – Augustine and Plato

When discussing the concepts of knowledge and belief, philosophers Augustine and Plato frame these ideas in varying ways. Augustine's perspective on knowledge and belief, as depicted in *De Magistro* (The Teacher), is that "knowledge of words is completed by knowledge of things, and by the hearing of words not even words are learned" (Augustine 94). Because of the difficulty inherent in true knowledge, belief is also a major component of Augustine's teachings; while knowledge is more objective (and thus harder to grasp), belief is much more subjective, as we choose who to believe. "What I know I also believe, but I do not know everything that I believe" (95).

Plato, on the other hand, believes that knowledge is a vital component to acquire virtue. The central question of "why knowledge is prized far more highly than right opinion, and why are they different" is Plato's primary concern in *Meno* (Plato 29). To Socrates in *Meno*, true belief is contained within knowledge, as something that is known definitively. The concept of anamnesis is explored, meaning 'recollection,' and is something that permits true beliefs to be anchored to an appropriate explanation for said belief. Plato notes that it really takes a sort of intuitive divinity to become virtuous, saying that prophets "say many true things when inspired, but they have no knowledge of what they are saying" (Plato 31).

Both Augustine and Plato have differing ideas of how belief and knowledge is actually acquired. According to Augustine, we often use words primarily to teach knowledge and belief: "I assert that there are two reasons for our using words, either to teach, or to remind others or, it may be, ourselves"

(Augustine 69). At the same time, words are not the introduction of new ideas but “ a calling to remembrance of the realities” the words stand for (71). Ideas and concepts are illustrated as signs, or representations of the truth, and words are often one method by which these signs are communicated and shared. There is a difference between signifier and signified, and “ knowledge is better than words”, indicating that the most important thing is to gain understanding rather than understand how we got it (89). This is accomplished by listening to the inner Teacher, who is God (95). Plato in Meno notes the acquisition of knowledge through recollection; one can believe something, but it takes the ability to adequately explain, or give an account of the truth of that opinion in order to make it knowledge. This tethering is what makes people acquire true knowledge; it starts as a belief, and then anamnesis is used to provide a logical explanation for the belief, turning it into knowledge.

There are many benefits and detriments to both philosophers’ perspectives on the concepts of knowledge and belief. In the case of Augustine, the differentiation between signifier and signified when talking about ideas allows us to understand that what we say about a thing is not what it is. However, his perspective also largely relies on God for its sense of belief, and does not provide a true road to knowledge other than calling it imperceptible. Plato’s perspective is based in logical reasoning, and is incredibly sensible; he cautions against assuming truths unless they are adequately explained and justified. At the same time, linking knowledge and belief to virtue seems to further obfuscate the truth, as they ironically state that virtue comes through inspiration.

Works Cited

Augustine. The Teacher.

Plato. Meno.