

Evidence to support  
beliefs in different  
areas knowledge  
philosophy essay



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The common phrase, 'seeing is believing', implies the message that you can only believe in something once you have seen it with your own eyes. The topic question for this essay, to what extent do we need evidence to support our beliefs in different areas of knowledge, challenges the idea of whether we need to see something in order to confirm our beliefs; or if through other ways of knowing such as reason, language and emotion we can support and trust in our own beliefs and ideals.

This topic forces you to question the trust you have in yourself, in other people and in the world around you; it makes you think about the different areas of knowledge and to what extent we need different types of evidence to eliminate any doubts in our minds. For the purpose of this essay I am going to define the term 'evidence' as physical evidence, examples of this type of evidence can range from fossils to written accounts of events. The knowledge we gain from this type of evidence is empirical knowledge, we interact with the evidence through sense perception. I would also like to define the term 'beliefs' as your personal opinions on a particular issue/subject; deciding whether something is real or fictitious.

The first area of knowledge I would like to examine is the natural sciences. Natural sciences are those which use scientific methods, such as observation and experimentation, to gain empirical knowledge about the world around us, in particular, nature. The natural sciences are built on tests upon tests that confirm hard data and results; therefore sense perception is a key way of knowing in this area as it allows us to verify information and theories on our own with great confidence.

This brings up my first knowledge issue, to what extent does the presence or lack of physical evidence in a knowledge area affect its validity? The title of this essay and this question in particular relates to my studies, and I found an answer within a personal example. I'm taking biology and physics in school, and we are taught that whenever we do an experiment we need to take multiple readings or samples and to conduct several trials in order to get a more fair and accurate result. This scientific method in the natural sciences is there to prove the validity of our data and also helps support our beliefs that what we discovered was in fact true.

Senses are what you base your judgment on, they are the most primal way of getting information, and in most cases, they're right; your senses give you the basic knowledge about an object or situation. However, some would argue as a counterclaim that sense perception can be deceiving, so in my opinion you shouldn't rely on it too much. To be a smart learner you need to think beyond what your senses perceive, you need to reason and analyze what you initially got from your senses.

An area of knowledge that relies on reason and analysis is mathematics. In math you may think you need evidence to prove all of the formulas and theories, but as evidence has been defined as strictly physical evidence, this area of knowledge does not need a lot of evidence in order for us to be supported in our beliefs that it is true. What is needed is non-empirical evidence. Non-empirical knowledge is based on the use of axioms or theories to arrive at conclusions, in non-empirical knowledge there is no need for experience, testing or observation. The conclusion depends on the validity of the theory and the logic used.

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Mathematics relies mainly on reason and logic to prove its validity to the world. Now reason is an interesting way of knowing as it incorporates the other three (sense perception, language and emotion), and by doing so we can rationalize our beliefs and theories to make them seem justified. I find that I am a rational person, using logic and reason to think things through, assessing both sides of the story, but a counterclaim could be that you shouldn't rely on reason too much because you might lose sight of the bigger picture. After contemplating this point I've come to the conclusion that it's important to engage the creative and emotional aspects of the mind; because without learning from others through language our reason would be insufficient for logical conclusions.

Next I would like to evaluate history as an area of knowledge. In history there is a need for physical evidence to confirm and validate events that have taken place in the past. History, in this sense, is a difficult area of knowledge to fully grasp and understand as for the most part we were not there to witness the events we believe to have taken place. We are uncovering and learning more about our history each day, but there are still many blank spaces.

For historians some of the most important and accurate information comes from primary source documents, written accounts of events from people who witnessed the event take place. I have included documents to the definition of physical evidence, however you must be careful about biases that may affect the validity of the evidence and the area of knowledge itself. The arousal of biases prompted my next knowledge issue, to what extent do biases affect the validity of the evidence?

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History, as an area of knowledge, can be passed down primarily through language. Language allows us to expand beyond our experience and learn about events in the past and in other areas of the world. Language as a way of knowing can become biased because the views told can be affected by the person's opinion. Belief and opinion can change the information, as the stories can become exaggerated, the meanings of words can be changed or misunderstood, and emotive language can sway people's views. But language should be relied on because if it has been passed on through generations, it must be important. I've decided that language is significant as it is up to you to agree or disagree with it, it gives you different points of view that you can use to create a view of your own.

The idea of creating your own views and opinions is one that can also relate to ethics. Ethics, in my opinion, is an interesting area of knowledge to examine as it requires the least amount, and some would argue, no evidence at all, to support it. We acquire our ethics and morals throughout our lives through many ways of knowing. Language is used at a young age as our parents instil their moral codes onto us to follow. Reason is used as we grow older and through personal growth and discovery we can formulate and follow our own morals that may change throughout our lives. This also relates to me personally as I find I don't tend to take things at 'face value', and I often need some form of evidence in order to feel assured in my beliefs. I also know that I do not often believe things that I can't see for myself or I haven't experienced for myself. This is why even though my parents are religious I am an atheist. I did use to go to church when I was

younger but now I am older I can choose my own ethics/morals and I can decide what I want to believe in or not.

Emotion is also a crucial way of knowing in respect to ethics as they often have strong emotional ties as people can feel very strongly in their beliefs. Since I've touched on the other ways of knowing I think it's important to evaluate emotion. Personally, I do not find emotion to be enough to support my beliefs in any area of knowledge, even ethics. You cannot rely on emotions because of the unpredictability of human desire - sometimes you are blinded by your own feelings or through peer pressure, and your emotions can affect your decision making and cloud your judgment.

Peer pressure is something everyone grows up with, and in order to incorporate the issue into this topic and to account for other people's perspectives I came up with the knowledge issue, to what extent do other people's opinions/beliefs affect your own opinions? In ethics others opinions can sway your emotions and your own beliefs, however a counterclaim could be that without emotion everyone would agree and there would be no progression because there would be no desire to advance, no curiosity, and no intolerance for problems. This result would also be an implication if society was to change based on that fact that you need physical evidence to support all theories.

Implications that could arise based on my arguments and claims that history and natural sciences need evidence to support people's beliefs suggest that creativity and the childhood happiness from the use of imagination is a bad thing. Quite frankly, I think that we would live in a pretty boring world if

people were forced to prove everything; and I don't think we would have progressed nearly as far as we have. An assumption I have made is that evidence that is not physical is less valid than non empirical evidence. I have taken this stance because that is my own personal opinion and I recognize that other people, perhaps those who are from a different culture, age or gender may have different views.

To conclude, this topic has made me both doubt and confirm my own sense of belief in the knowledge areas, and in my life. I questioned whether it is harmful or beneficial to accept things as they are? And does that illustrate a lack of interest or judgment? I don't have a definite answer, but I think it's important to have a balance of both - I think it's actually quite refreshing to be able to both have the need for and not need evidence at the same time . No one can live their life searching for, or requesting proof to every question or doubt, it's just impractical, and sometimes there isn't any, we just need to have a little faith.