

# Example of theories of knowledge essay

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



The basic question in understanding what we know is the “ How do we know?” A supplementary question to this is “ How do we know that what we know is real and true?” Various philosophies stem out of these basic question. While epistemology is the general study of the knowing and the process of knowing, specific theories can be applied to these perennial questions. (Gibson, 1988) These include realism, idealism, empiricism, rationalism, constructivism, among others. While these are lengthy and heated topics, this paper will concentrate on two major theories of knowledge, namely, empiricism and constructivism, as points of understanding in the given question.

Fundamentally, basic knowledge comes from our senses by perceiving things. We perceive and qualify what we perceive through our five senses. This is how we experience qualify truth. For instance, we may not know that fire is hot. However, once we see a fire or any of its derivative (like a burning paper or a lighted candle), if we try to observe and/or touch it, we will confirm or validate that it is really hot. This is because we have experienced it through our sense of touch.

In general, this is the theory of knowledge called empiricism. Empiricism is a theory of knowledge which validates experience, specifically those which are based on observable perceptions which can be qualified through the senses. We accept something as true because we have experienced it to be true through our senses. (Gibson, 1988) The three types of empiricism are positive empiricism, historicism and realism.

Beliefs and belief system can be categorized under empiricism because it is an inherent and basic source of knowledge. However, the scientific and ethical foundations of the beliefs are carefully evaluated before it is considered as truth. (Ibid.) Hence, by certain innate and logical means, we generalize that some things which we inherently believe are actually true. By the process of empiricism, we qualify each and every small or large areas of knowledge as true.

However, this is not realistic in real terms because we do not have the time and the physical presence in all aspects of discovery. This is impractical on the part of human beings. To exemplify, we cannot hold, touch, see or smell all objects and things to validate them as true and finite objects with specific characteristics. This is why, at times, we just believe some things and facts are true through our belief system and common sense. This is also because our rationality makes a sound judgment out of our beliefs and perceptions. (Gibson, 1988)

Take for example the idea that the world is round. By consulting with our logic and through scientific generalization by means of accumulated knowledge, we believe it to be true because of valid justifications such as the world revolves around the sun or that a ship can circumnavigate the world, etc. Hence, we often infer things to be true based on various constructs which we have held in accumulating greater truths about the world we live in.

A consequent question to this practice is “ how and when do we draw the line in accepting certain things and ideas as true?” For instance, the world

used to believe that the earth is the center of the universe. By certain scientific processes and debates, this theory was superseded by a more coherent and factual theory that theorizes that the sun as the center of the universe. In this illustration, we see the imminent role played by the scientific community in investigating and confounding on more factual truths and debunking old scientific theories, notions and beliefs when they are not true.

The progression of knowledge can be illustrated by how certain truths and accepted theories have changed through time. For instance, Alfred Wegener released his Theory of Continental Drift in 1912. The scientific community found some shortcomings in its geophysical component. They have correctly demonstrated that Wegener's theory was faulty. The gravitational force which he assumed to move the continents were actually not strong enough to cause the drifts. (Campbell, 1998) In the years to come, many other scientists such as Hess, Lawrence, Matthews, and Vine improved on Wegener's theory. This led to the development of a better theory of plate tectonics. (Ibid.) This theory poignantly generalizes various scientific concepts like earthquakes, volcanism, mountain building, and other disparate events into one coherent entity and principle.

Such progression in the pursuit of new knowledge leads us to the second theory of knowledge which is called constructivism. This theory holds that knowledge is constructed by each individual person and/or a group of people or a society. It also supposes that the quality of the theory relies on its utility in making predictions which suits the general impression of reality. (Campbell,

1998) This reality, is assumed as independent of the observer and the test of objectivity is unanswered. (Ibid.) Constructivism is a philosophical view which considers all knowledge as “ a compilation of human-made constructions” and not the objective discovery of an unqualified truth.” (Jonassen, 1991) It is mainly concerned with the construction of knowledge.

The principal idea of this theory is that new knowledge is built upon the foundation of previous knowledge. Constructivists maintain that scientific knowledge is constructed by scientists and not discovered from the world. Constructivists argue that the concepts of science are mental constructs proposed in order to explain sensory experience. Another important tenet of Constructivist theory is that there is no single valid methodology in science, but rather a diversity of useful methods. (Jonassen, 1991)

There are several forms of constructivism and these are developmental constructivism, feminist constructivism, radical constructivism, social constructivism, trivial constructivism, among others. While constructivism is a relatively a new science with regards to epistemology, many aspects of this branch of epistemology have been used by empiricists, idealists instrumentalists, operationalists, etc. in discourse about the human pursuit of real truths.

In closing, this author intends to emphasize the role of constructivism as the realistic pursuit of knowledge and truth in this highly information driven society. Being a pragmatic, this author basically thinks that empiricism should be confined to more exact and pure sciences such as Mathematics and Geometry because most of the things and data are not perceptually

experienced. It is a futile exercise to experience each and every event to render it as truth or as a form of knowledge. Meanwhile, the role of the scientific community has been very vital in the effective pursuit of more accurate truths through the years. The scientific tradition and the emblem of predictability in each new scientific theory motivate more and more scientists to provide the world with more accurate and real sense perception and generalizations.

### **References:**

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