

Analysing doubt as the key to knowledge philosophy essay

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One of the four fundamental ways of knowing is reasoning. We as rational thinkers always try to give reasons for almost all of the phenomena happening around us. From the birth of a baby to the death of an old man, and from the magnificence of the lovely red sky in the morning to the ugly appearance of the angler fish, most physical processes have been reasoned by natural sciences. Various other happenings have been reasoned by other areas of knowledge, too. But how did this reasoning come about? Why do we follow the heliocentric model of the solar system today as opposed to a few centuries ago, when the geocentric model was considered very precise? Why am I enjoying the benefits of democracy today if almost half of this world was ruled by the British empire a century ago? Why was Thomson's model of the atom rejected and why do we still spend millions of dollars on research when we know that scientists have already reasoned a lot of the phenomena happening around us? The answer lies in the word 'why'. We did and continue to do so because we doubted certain theories and principles. I cannot stop myself from using the very hackneyed example of Copernicus' contribution to the model of this solar system. His belief of a heliocentric model was considered heretical by the Church, which inflicted harsh punishments on him. In hindsight though, we know today that the geocentric model isn't true, and we also know that his views, once considered iconoclastic, are indeed true. It all happened because of doubt! If we look at Political Science, a subject falling in the domain of human sciences, we realize that doubt isn't exclusive to the progress of natural sciences only. As I mentioned before, most countries today are democracies; the political scene today is indeed in stark contrast to the one a few centuries ago, when

monarchy was the dominant political system. Even today, as I write this essay, U. S president Barack Obama emphasized the importance of democracy in his speech delivered in Mumbai. Again, why? Why has the political scene changed so dramatically in such a short span of time? Why did uprisings like the French and the Russian revolution take place? Why did Russia transform from a communist state to a democratic one? It all happened because certain people doubted the way this world was run. They put forth their claims that if the people of this world are given a choice to decide who will govern them, then their lives would be much better. Today, as China is growing at a breath-taking speed and the U. S is seeing unprecedented levels of unemployment in recent times, people are asking the same questions. Is communism actually a better system of governance than democracy? I am very happy that such questions are cropping up in my mind. We must always be on our toes, constantly doubting and trying to properly reason the dynamic processes happening around us. The moment we stop doubting the fallacies of democracy as a system of governance, we will stop to develop as a people. Nothing is perfect, and therefore we must always doubt many a convincing things, even if they are as basic as the right to vote. I, for example, tend to think many times that the right to vote must only be endowed upon educated people, people who can make reasoned as well as ethical choices. However, I realize that people may take strong objection to my views, saying that my views are elitist and against the fundamental human rights. Perhaps their claims are true to a certain extent, but what is unfortunate is that most people tend to get swayed by their emotions. They become so expressive that they want to end the debate then

and there itself, which, according to me, is wrong. If any claim is to be debunked or disapproved, it must be done after proper deliberation and debate. But, I always try to be doubtful of my own beliefs which should be everyone's attitude. If we doubt others, we must also see the other side of the coin. We must always look at the counter-argument. When I did this, I realised that educated people too can, and certainly do, have partisan beliefs. Illiterate voters can perhaps choose a better leader than an educated rich person, who probably doesn't even know the ground reality and problems faced by the poor. Thus, while doubt can be very healthy and productive, it can also be counter-productive. But doubt can only be answered by doubt. If we doubt certain things, which we definitely should, we should also ask questions about the doubts that are being asked. Only if this protocol is followed can we reach closer to the truth, as doubting certain things and then questioning the doubts themselves would also take care of the problems in reaching truth such as biases and assumptions." There is nothing more dreadful than the habit of doubt. Doubt separates people. It is a poison that disintegrates friendships and breaks up pleasant relations. It is a thorn that irritates and hurts; it is a sword that kills." - Gautam

Buddha[1]As Buddha said, doubt can also be counterproductive. Doubt can hinder the process of adding new knowledge to the different areas of knowledge. If, for example, I doubt everything written in my physics textbook, will I be able to add new scientific knowledge? Will I get enlightened about new theories? I will definitely have to believe in most of the things mentioned in the books. I will subsequently have to critically assess my doubts and apprehensions from a dispassionate point of view, so

that prejudices and biases do not hinder the process. If this is done, we can add new, valuable and objective knowledge. Moreover, Buddha's claim has a lot of validity if we look at ethical issues in all walks of life. Is it ethical to always doubt your best friend for forgery? Is it always wise to doubt your wife for cheating on you? Isn't there something called 'trust' in this world? Can a student learn if he forever doesn't trust his teacher? Will you ever be able to sleep if you doubt that your son may kill you for money? Indeed, doubt has the power to create newer knowledge, but it also may act as a poison that hinders the creation of new knowledge if used irrationally. Rational doubts that can be verified with evidence and ones which have the potential to add new knowledge and to unlock biases and assumptions are what we need to progress. Almost all the challenges we face today are intricately complex. From issues of terrorism and violence to choosing systems of governance and education, we must be cautious in reaching conclusions. It is important is for all of us to enliven the devil's advocate in ourselves and to doubt what is happening around us, but we also need to have an element of trust in our investigation. We definitely need to 'trust' our 'doubts', however paradoxical that might seem to you. If, for example, you doubt that I have plagiarized this essay, how will you confirm your doubt? You will have to trust your doubts, verify or falsify them using evidence (like a plagiarism checking software) and only then will you reach the truth! On other occasions, you will simply have to trust; trust the IBO, trust your friend, et cetera! Moreover, I believe that nothing in this world is absolutely certain. Many people want to know the precise truth, without knowing that it may not exist. Scientists estimate the distance to the sun in

millions of kilometres. With the progress of technology, we may be able to predict this distance to the accuracy of centimetres. What about the distance to the accuracy of nanometres? If it's found, it may aid scientists in predicting climate change more accurately. But there are some people who want immense accuracy even in academic measurements like measuring people's height and weight. What are we going to gain from knowing our height to the accuracy of picometres and weight to the accuracy of micrograms? This is the question we need to ask before doubting anything. Randomly doubting everything around us and forgetting what rationality and utility mean won't add much valuable knowledge to the areas of knowledge. Doubts are essential only if doubting is worth the discovery of novel and important knowledge. I believe that doubt is one of the keys to knowledge, but not the only one. Trust also plays a very important role in all areas of knowledge. Determining the exact extent to which doubt is the key to knowledge would be as impossible as determining the limits of this universe. But it is certain that doubt is as important as oxygen and trust is as important as water. What is more important- oxygen or water? It's difficult to tell!

Word count- 1600 words