

Four ways of knowing essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The world is a confusing place in which we find a bewildering variety of different opinions. Our common sense picture of reality probably contains inaccuracies and biases that we are not aware of. We acquire knowledge about the world through language, perception, reason and emotion, but none of these ways of knowing can give us certainty. According to relativism, truth is relative to the individual; but the fact that we take seriously the idea that someone may be wrong in their beliefs suggests that relativism is false.

Since there are few black and white certainties in the world, we have to rely more on judgement. An important aspect of good judgement is finding the right balance between scepticism and open-mindedness. Two preliminary criteria for deciding whether a knowledge claim is plausible are evidence and coherence. Since we are what we believe and our beliefs affect our actions, if we want to be the authentic and responsible we should occasionally subject our beliefs to critical scrutiny. A good preliminary definition of knowledge is to say that it is justified true belief.

According to the traditional picture, truth is independent, and simply believing that something is true does not make it true. Rather than say that belief and knowledge are two completely different things, it may make more sense to think of there being a belief-knowledge continuum. Knowledge is more than true belief, for your belief must be justified in the right kind of way. The main thing that seems to distinguish an acceptable from an unacceptable justification is reliability. Whether or not you are justified in saying you know something depends on context.

When you say you know something you are in a sense taking responsibility for its truth. There are different levels of knowledge ranging from a superficial grasp of a subject to complete mastery of it. The difference between knowledge and information is that knowledge is information organised into a meaningful whole. The fact that we can share our knowledge means that we can all know a great deal more than if we relied purely on our own resources. Despite the advantages of accepting knowledge second-hand from other people, the danger is that it can lead to authority worship.

A great deal of our knowledge comes through language and this makes possible an intellectual division of labour. Language is a subset of communication and is rule-governed intended and creative. We need to understand what a sentence means before we can decide whether it is true or false. Since the definition, denotation and image theories of meaning all have shortcomings; perhaps we should say that meaning is a matter of know-how. A great deal of language is ambiguous and there is an element of interpretation built into all communication.

Since different languages divide the world up in different ways translation is more of an art than a science. We use language to label and classify and this brings with it the danger that we misclassify or stereotype things. Although language may not determine our experience of reality, as claimed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it seems likely that it influences it. We use language not only to describe but also to influence and persuade and sometimes manipulate the way people see things.

Whether or not there are some truths that lie beyond language is a matter of continuing debate. Our five senses are an important source of knowledge about the world; but rather than passively reflect reality, they actively structure it. Perception consists of two elements, sensation and interpretation, but we are often not consciously aware of the latter element. Looking at visual illusions can help make us aware of the role that interpretation plays in perception.

Perception is selective and what we notice in a given environment is influenced by factors such as intensity, contrast, interest, mood and expectations. The fallibility of perception is relevant to issues in the real world such as eye witness testimony in criminal trials. We usually distinguish between appearance and reality by using a second sense to confirm the evidence of the first, or by appealing to coherence or the testimony of other people. The way we experience the world is partly determined by the structure of our sense-organs.

If we accept that pain and taste are subjective, we might conclude that colour and sound are also subjective. There are three main theories about the relationship between perception and reality: common sense, realism, scientific realism and phenomenalism. Despite sceptical doubts, the existence of the external world is the most reasonable hypothesis to account for the regularity of our experience. Although perception cannot give us certainty if the evidence of our senses is consistent with what reason and intuition tell us, it can still provide a good foundation for reliable knowledge.