

Persian proverb
doubt is the key to
knowledge
philosophy essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

I have been quite fascinated by the many changes that keep happening to what seems to be a certainty and realized that doubt has traditionally played a significant part in the philosophy of knowledge. The ancient Greek philosophers debated the issue of knowledge and the relevance of doubt. Plato described knowledge as 'justified true belief'¹ - the key word being 'belief' which in itself is subject to interpretations by individuals. The famous French philosopher Renee Descartes tried to define knowledge in terms of certainty and in his arguments the path to certainty begins with doubt. In his book Meditation 1 - What can be called Doubt, he says "I realised that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last".²

So is there any truth in the Persian saying "Doubt is the Key to Knowledge"? Is this purely an epistemological rhetoric or will it hold true in areas of knowledge as diverse as science and arts?

Nobel laureate and leading physicist, Richard Feynman described doubt in relation to science as follows: "Scientific knowledge is a body of statements of varying degrees of certainty -some most unsure, some nearly sure, none absolutely certain." A strong parallel can be drawn between his statement and space research. What made man land on the moon or explore the possibility of life on Mars? As a knower, I know that if we would not have doubted the probability that man could live on the moon, space expeditions to the moon would have stopped after the near life and death drama of Apollo 13. The Apollo3 series of expeditions seemed to have established that the moon was completely uninhabitable because of its inability to sustain

<https://assignbuster.com/persian-proverb-doubt-is-the-key-to-knowledge-philosophy-essay/>

water. The desire to know and doubting what was already known, led to the Indian unmanned space expedition to the moon. The Indian space craft ' Chandrayaan' discovered traces of ice on the moon's surface. So, can man really live on the moon? Science generally relies on a set of deductive logic to prove their hypothesis. Euclid's two dimensional geometry is a classic case of using modus ponens or deductive logic to prove assumptions or hypothesis. Going by this, one could easily argue as follows: Man needs oxygen and water to live. Water contains oxygen. Ice is formed from water. Ice has been found on the moon therefore, man can live on the moon.

[www. plato. stanford. edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/...](http://www.plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-analysis/...) modus ponens –
[xenodochy. org/article/popper. html](http://xenodochy.org/article/popper.html)

[www. rep. routeledge. com/article/DA026SECT4](http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/DA026SECT4)

[www. space. com/8193-caused-apollo-13-accident. html](http://www.space.com/8193-caused-apollo-13-accident.html)

Popper doubted this process of deductive truism and said it cannot prove a theory true every time. In his theory of falsification he argued that modus ponens is purely truth preserving and therefore a better alternative is modus tollens which uses the conditions of denying to falsify the assumption e. g. if P implies Q and Q is false, then P must also be false. Popper's falsification theory pointed out " no scientific theory is ever conclusively verified, no matter how many tests it has survived" 4

For example, Schizophrenia has all along been seen as a chronic relapsing psychotic disorder that primarily affects thought and behaviour. 5 A recent study by the University College of London has established by means of an

<https://assignbuster.com/persian-proverb-doubt-is-the-key-to-knowledge-philosophy-essay/>

experiment that in some cases, the perceptions of schizophrenic people is more accurate than those without schizophrenia. Therefore a doubt is created whether schizophrenia is really a psychotic condition or are there other dimensions to it.

Going by the argument that deductive knowledge doesn't always hold good, I can safely surmise that we do not have adequate information to conclude that man can live on the moon and therefore more questions need to be asked.

On the other hand doubting every scientific fact leading to unnecessary research and information overload could lead to a situation of complete paralysis in our normal day to day life. For example, if we were to doubt that oxygen is a life giving substance, then it could lead to critical situations in medical emergencies.

Similarly while dealing with society at large and friends and relatives in particular, if we were to doubt everything to seek more knowledge, we are most likely to find ourselves with very little knowledge and even fewer friends! People's emotions, intentions and their behavioural traits like honesty, integrity, sincerity etc. should not be doubted. There will be rare cases where people may want to deceive, but that by itself cannot lead to a doubt about people in general.

science.martinsewell.com/falsification.html

priory.com/schizo.htm.

<https://assignbuster.com/persian-proverb-doubt-is-the-key-to-knowledge-philosophy-essay/>

Shakespeare said “ If music be the food of love, play on” 6. Wonderful as it sounds and probably not argued too much, yet people have researched the effect that music has on plants. There is one school of thought that believes and claims to have empirical data to prove that plants respond well to sedentary classical and similar genre of music but they wilt under the influence of hard rock and similar music. Drawing a parallel with human life they argue that hard rock, metal etc is actually detrimental for human growth and therefore should be banned.

Traditional botanists however argue that the so called empirical data based on research is purely coincidental and there is no correlation between music and growth of plants. They resort to another set of evidence which shows that growth of plants is related to a number of factors that are not related to music such as condition of soil, temp, moisture content etc.

On a third dimension, music itself has different genres enjoyed by different people. Therefore is music also subject to perception or is it absolute? Does it really impact plant detrimentally or otherwise? If we doubt the basis of the claims and counterclaims and pursue with investigation from all angles, then, knowledge will progress and facts can be established.

Science notwithstanding, art is abstract enough to create its own set of debates which normally focuses on the likes and dislikes of the perceiver. This leads me to wonder, if art and aesthetics are synonymous then to what extent is beauty a necessary ingredient for something to be considered art? Plato’s theory of forms claimed that “ It is by beauty that beautiful things are beautiful.” Immanuel Kant, an 18th century German philosopher on the other

hand claimed that aesthetic experience is not a matter of understanding or reason, (and hence not true knowledge), but is a matter of judgment [“Critique of Judgment”]. 7

Taking this argument further, the painting by Eduard Manet⁸, ‘Luncheon on the Grass’, was hotly debated when it was first exhibited in 1863. Most of all it was not viewed as an art, but as an affront to society. The painting, depicting a naked woman sitting amidst two fully clad men, all of whose images were contemporary and almost identifiable as one among the viewers, earned the painter the wrath of the critiques and masses. Yet an earlier painting by Thomas Couture in 1847⁹, ‘Romans in The Decadence of the Empire’ depicted a scene with Romans lying about with many naked women in various poses of sensuality. It appears to me, that a nude in classical settings such as the ancient Greek or Roman empires was considered acceptable but a nude in contemporary setting was not. Either way, the painting, known for its controversy today hangs as a masterpiece in the Musee D Oray in Paris.

6. [www. enotes. com/shaespeare-quotes/music-food-love-play](http://www.enotes.com/shakespeare-quotes/music-food-love-play)

7 [www. creatorix. com. au/philosophy/t03/g010. html](http://www.creatorix.com.au/philosophy/t03/g010.html)

8 [http://blog. photos2view. com/2008/05/27/art-and-controversy. htm](http://blog.photos2view.com/2008/05/27/art-and-controversy.htm)

9 [http://www. essentialart.](http://www.essentialart.com/acatalog/Edouard_Manet_prints_Luncheon_on_the_Grass.html)

[com/acatalog/Edouard_Manet_prints_Luncheon_on_the_Grass. html](http://www.essentialart.com/acatalog/Edouard_Manet_prints_Luncheon_on_the_Grass.html)

As a student of visual arts in IB, I was told that there are three basic colours – red, yellow and blue. While using the computer, strangely I found that the <https://assignbuster.com/persian-proverb-doubt-is-the-key-to-knowledge-philosophy-essay/>

primary colours were red, green and blue, otherwise called the RGB format.

So, what are the basic colours?

The answer lay in the different mediums where they are used. Red, yellow and blue are primary colours which are used in while mixing dyes to achieve other shades and colours on a painting canvas.

Red, green and blue are used where there are overlapping shades to be used while projecting on screens such as in LCD panels or monitors for computer screen. My doubt about the basic colours led me to seek additional information.

The key to knowledge in this area of art was learning how to mix primary dyes in painting and this learning has been both experimental and experiential.

Taking the Platonist view that knowledge is justified true belief, I can now reasonably claim to have knowledge that red and yellow if mixed in equal proportions would give the colour orange or shades of orange.

Whether the area of knowledge is science or arts, doubts and questions remain. Some answered with a reasonable amount of justification which points to a probable definitive answer based on information available at that point in time and others remain unresolved leading to further doubts.

Therefore the question - is knowledge absolute or is it infinite? We can never know unless we doubt all knowledge leading us to seek more and more information.

The downside – do we doubt everything in life or should we accept some events as empirical realities. The answer? It is situational.

At the end, as a knower, when I look at the word doubt I can safely say that the Persian saying “Doubt is the Key to Knowledge” is not just an epistemological rhetoric; it is indeed a means to gain more knowledge. In the words of H L Mencken – an influential writer and critic of the 20th century, “Men become civilized, not in proportion to their willingness to believe, but in proportion to their readiness to doubt.” 9

www.leopoldsegedin.com/essay_detail_mona_lisas_smile.cfm

www.notable-quotes.com/d/doubt_quotes.html