

## C. Ancient Philosophy; 2<sup>nd</sup> Student Essay

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What is it to 'know' that something is the case? Can the truth of a scientific theory ever be known? Illustrate your answer by reference to Xenophanes' reflections on the limits of human knowledge.

What is it to know? Or rather what is knowledge? In ancient antiquity Xenophanes contemplated the issue of knowledge after a reflection on the nature of true divinity. After having disposed of the all too pervading anthropomorphic representations of gods in his time and settling on a single perfect being, naturally his conception of God would entail divine omniscience. A natural consequence of this was the contrasting of his all-knowing God to the limited knowledge of the Greek gods and since these gods were representations of man, by extension the limited knowledge of man. Can man have knowledge?

What it means to "know" can mean several things to several people. Likewise we can differentiate between different forms of knowledge. Take for instance the technician you call to fix an Air conditioning unit. He knows the "process" to do so, this is procedural knowledge. Then I know my mother and my sister, this is acquaintance knowledge. But more importantly, there is propositional knowledge. A proposition is a statement in which something is affirmed or denied, so that it can therefore be significantly characterized as either true or false. A lot of knowledge we have falls under this category. Upon little reflection, one can clearly see knowledge is a property of thinking things. Things such as tables, chairs cannot have knowledge. Simply because they don't have minds, hence since knowledge is associated with minds, it must be a mental state. But there exists different kinds of mental states. I have intentions, desires, feelings and beliefs. It's the latter that we are primarily concerned with, for knowledge entails belief. For me to know something I must first form a belief about it. My favorite cereal is called "corn flakes". I cannot know if it is made from corn except I first of all form a belief when it is or it is not then establish the veracity of this belief. Whether I desire or intend that it is made from corn does not entail me knowing if it is made from corn.

But then I can be mistaken in my belief. Maybe corn flakes is not made out of corn but wheat or dried rolled neutral shoe polish. Knowledge does entail belief but that belief must also be true. False beliefs cannot count as knowledge. Hence "truth" is a requirement for knowledge.

A friend of mine recently won one million naira on the game show who wants to be a millionaire. He could have doubled his winnings if he had attempted the next question, but he prudently chose to walk away. Suppose he did attempt the next question, and did get it right based on a lucky guess, would that count as knowledge? I don't think so because picking answers at random would hardly seem as if one knows a thing. Though his answer would be correct (TRUE) it would clearly not count as knowledge. So a belief needs more than for it just to be true to count as knowledge.

Now, what if this friend was asked a question about Natural law theory in jurisprudence and he happens to be a lawyer. We can infer that luck might not have anything to do with his correct answer. This is simply because he was well acquainted with the subject matter. As such it can be said that we "know",

if our beliefs arise out of a process that is devoid of luck. What that process is happens to be the subject of much controversy. At least it's evident that the initial part of the process be that our mental faculties are functioning properly.

Xenophanes was the first of the ancients to draw attention to the complexities of knowledge. Although some may have mistaken his position as an attack on the possibility of knowledge, it is more likely he was pleading humility and caution particularly in matters we cannot directly experience. Such is the case with empirical science. In modern times caution has been thrown to the wind and one is all too familiar with emphatically dogmatic assertions made by scientists. But can the truth of a scientific theory ever be known?

First, one thing we can be sure of from our speculations into the nature of knowledge is that knowledge presupposes truth. There could be truth without knowledge, but no knowledge without truth. So the question naturally arises 'are scientific theories true?' From the history of science, few would argue that current theories are true in any complete or final way. Rather the claim is made that current theories are approximately true to one degree or another. But our understanding of truth is that it corresponds to reality and it is objective. If this is so how then can truth come in degrees? It seems pretty obvious that something is either true or false and not in-between such as being approximately true. If we accept one theory as being up to date then we will have to consider its predecessor as literally false even though it is still useful under certain conditions. A good example of this would be Newton's laws of motion. This scientific Law is said to be only approximately correct, breaking down when velocities approach that of light as shown by Einstein's theory of relativity.

So, for something to be known, the first condition is that it must be true. But since our current scientific theories are not true or complete in any final way can they count as knowledge? Maybe, if they are taken as procedural knowledge. Since a lot of these theories rely on empirical regularities rather than on explanatory concepts, we can 'know' how to produce certain technologies. For example light bulbs have worked and will continue to work even though our theories of why they have worked have changed over time (light as particles or waves or a combination of the two).

Finally, the question can the truth of a scientific theory ever be known is akin to asking can the truth of a scientific theory ever be true, and our holding it to be true is not based on luck but on some reliable process? I think this is just a tautology. I think the question should be are scientific theories true, and in what sense? Or can scientific theories furnish us with knowledge? The answer to the latter question as it concerns propositional knowledge is that they are false.