



BRANKSOME HALL

THEORY of KNOWLEDGE

Prescribed Topic #6

“A skeptic is one who is willing to question any knowledge claim, asking for clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence” (adapted from Paul Kurtz, 1994).

Evaluate this approach in two areas of knowledge.

Name: Beatrice Chan

Student IB number: 001437 - 0022

School: Branksome Hall

TOK teacher: Ms. Marshall

Date: January 17, 2014

Word Count: 1600

Prescribed Title #6: “A skeptic is one who is willing to question any knowledge claim, asking for clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence” (adapted from Paul Kurtz, 1994). Evaluate this approach in two areas of knowledge.

The prescribed title asks us to evaluate the approach that “a skeptic is one who is willing to question any knowledge claim, asking for clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence”. The knowledge issue embedded in this title concerns our personal justification or confirmation regarding the value of a piece of knowledge. In order to effectively evaluate the assertion proposed by this prescribed title, it is useful to deconstruct the language used in the title. A skeptic refers to a knower that does not confer full trust on a proposition. A critical, open mind of a skeptic encourages the knower to eliminate unknowns that prevent a proposition from becoming a piece of knowledge. Knowledge is defined as “justified, true belief” which asserts that for a proposition to be considered as knowledge, it must go through tests of rational methodology to confirm its truthfulness. The act of questioning and asking involves the use of ways of knowing, which is what skeptics rely on in order to reach a conclusion that he or she will act upon. Skeptics demand clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence because they provide them with confirmation and satisfaction regarding the value of a proposition. The sense of confirmation and satisfaction is provided by the elimination of unknowns, which is the motive that drives their skeptical behavior. Hence, clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence does not necessarily give the entire truth in reality because it solely relies on elimination of unknowns, which gives a biased confirmation and satisfaction as it neglects other factors that contribute to truth in reality.

The knowledge issue arises from the title is: **How is our interpretation of a proposition confirmed by the satisfaction provided by the ways of knowing?** In this knowledge issue, interpretation of a proposition refers to the belief or opinion held personally by a knower based on how things seem, which is contingent upon personal understanding and experiences. This knowledge issue arises from the title because clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence construct a perception of a seemingly true, justifiable interpretation for

skeptics through the ways of knowing, which are pathways that could lead to the arrival of a wrong conclusion that the knower holds due to omission or elimination of unknowns.

To address the knowledge issue, I will examine how knowers arrive at an interpretation of a proposition through sense perception and reason as the ways of knowing. To evaluate the prescribed title, I will consider how unknowns are eliminated in a skeptical manner stated in the title: to question any knowledge claim, to ask for clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence in visual arts and chemistry.

Visual arts is an activity that allows artists to express an intent. As a higher level IB visual arts student, I have had the opportunity to experience the role that sense perception plays in communicating implicit messages behind a work of art – the artistic intent. My teacher has always reminded us that feedback given by audience is crucial because the intent that an artwork holds is contingent upon audience's interpretation. Hence, successful pieces of artwork are those that effectively deliver the true intent of the artist to the audience –one of the biggest challenges in art.

Visual art revolves around implicit and perceptual uncertainties because audience respond to stimuli by generating meanings based on their personal experiences. For example, when presented with a piece of information written in a familiar language, the human mind involuntarily finds meaning in the words because perception is directed towards making sense of the external world. With that being said, sense perception is learned and is context dependent. Our minds unconsciously interpret things that we can relate to – the mental files of experiences. When examining a piece of artwork, our minds undergo multiple levels of interpretation: the first glance is perceived as what we “want” to see, followed by multiple hard-edged, gimlet-eyed glances, because human instinct drives the mind to seek for validity – an effect called “slipping glimpse” coined by the artist, William de Kooning¹. This behavior confirms one of natures of skeptics: to look for adequacy of evidence. When the mind is not

¹ BASTIAN, Sue, *Theory of Knowledge*, England, Heinemann, 2008, 44 p.

satisfied with the initial conventional interpretation of visuals perceived, it attempts to find satisfactory evidence that are visually present in an artwork to confirm the interpretation that was initially constructed for the proposition of an artwork. This phenomenon can be explained by the Gestalt Principle, known as the Law of Simplicity², which suggests that we tend to see things not as they really are in reality, but as our minds think they should be according to our experiences. Subjectivity is involved in this process of perception and interpretation because unknowns are eliminated when our minds were involuntarily interpreting meanings that can associate with our experience when we try to derive the intent of an artwork.

Another subjective approach which our minds take to interpret an artwork is filling in sense data, which allows us to perceive the whole configuration that corresponds to our initial perception of the artwork, rather than interpreting collections of fragments, e.g. as visual details of the artwork. The study of visual perception reveals that the perceptual processes that our minds undergo are structured to organize meanings, rather than recording data. Sense data are organized into a web of beliefs in a way that is relevant to our experiences; in other words, sense experience is assimilated into a field of meaning.

Since sense perception functions to organize fragments of data rather than recording it, there are often differences between the proposition derived from the organization of data and the actual meaning in reality. Nevertheless, if our minds were to record data as separate fragments, our minds would be paralyzed by the disparity between each input, making it hard to maintain connections. Although the organization of sense data generalizes proposition by omitting potential unknowns, sense perception confirms the stability and coherence of the interpretation of a proposition; it provides the adequacy of evidence that our minds seek when perceiving visual data.

The stability and coherence of the interpretation of a proposition is as equally as important in chemistry – the study of structure and behavior of the physical world. Chemistry,

² BASTIAN, Sue, *Theory of Knowledge*, England, Heinemann, 2008, 54 p.

as one of the natural sciences, involves the practice of observing and measuring, and development of theories to describe the results of these activities. Thus, validity of theories can be confirmed by premises.

However, as a higher level chemistry student, I have encountered numerous situations where a theory can be said to be logically valid but does not represent truth in reality. The issue that I encountered arises from inductive reasoning as a way of knowing: lithium has only one electron in its valence shell and is an alkali metal; sodium has only one electron in its valence shell and is alkali metal; potassium has only one electron in its valence shell and is an alkali metal; therefore, all elements that have only one electron in its valence shell is an alkali metal. Here, the quantifier “all” provides the knower with a confirmation that the statement that “hydrogen is an alkali metal” is logically valid because it has only one electron in its valence shell, which fits the criteria in the premises. Nevertheless, this statement fails to confirm the truth in reality because hydrogen is a non-metal instead. This inference shows that inductive reasoning is informative yet less certain, because conclusions are based on a small proportion of all possible cases in the real world. A generalization made by logical method does provide clarity and consistency in logic that satisfy the skeptical minds; however, the particular conclusion made is true to only a more or less probable degree. Skeptics that perceive a proposition through this inductive reasoning ought to consider whether the number of cases are sufficient enough to confirm a fair interpretation of the proposition, and whether there are other existing uncertainties or unknowns that limits the truth of a proposition, which are not taken into consideration when developing a conclusion through inductive reasoning.

Rather than seeing uncertainties and unknowns as inevitable factors that hinder a knower from reaching the truth of a proposition, Jacob Bronowski proposed a different view that challenges the satisfaction that knowers receive from logically reasoning. He claimed that “knowledge is merely confined within a certain tolerance”³. Tolerance, in science, refers to the amount by which a measurement might vary and still be acceptable. In terms of skepticism,

³ BASTIAN, Sue, *Theory of Knowledge*, England, Heinemann, 2008, 178 p.

tolerance suggests that a conclusion can still be considered as truth given the recognition of possible errors. While uncertainties and unknowns prevents a knower from transforming a proposition into knowledge, tolerance provides a justification that satisfies a knower's perception or interpretation of a proposition.

The desire to be certain about the value of a knowledge claim is the ultimate motive that encourages the skeptical behavior of a knower: to ask for clarity in definition, consistency in logic and adequacy of evidence. These actions are essentially guided by the satisfaction provided by the ways of knowing to confirm and justify a knower's interpretation of a proposition. In this essay, the subjectivity and validity of two ways of knowing have been examined. In an ideal world, we would like to believe that "seeing and logic equal to knowing". This way, knowledge would just simply be a series of un-interpreted observations and reasons, revealing the ultimate truth that our curiosity seeks to explain. However, without the perception and interpretation of a proposition of a knower, knowledge itself would have no meaning.

BEATRICE CHAN

Candidate Number: 001437 – 0022

TOK Essay

Bibliography

BASTIAN, Sue, *Theory of Knowledge*, England, Heinemann, 2008, 44 p.

BASTIAN, Sue, *Theory of Knowledge*, England, Heinemann, 2008, 54 p.

BASTIAN, Sue, *Theory of Knowledge*, England, Heinemann, 2008, 178 p.