

Enquiry: Knowledge and Perspectives

These are perspectives from famous thinkers whose names have been strategically omitted to help you engage with their thoughts without prejudice. What do the perspectives tell you about knowledge and the person who knows? Is it possible to agree with all of them? How does your idea of knowledge affect your role as a student, researcher, teacher or colleague?

If I think that only my truth is valid, I'll close myself off to others and will not learn anything new. The right way to improve my perception and capacity to think and to hear with respect is to be open to differences and to refuse the idea that I am absolutely right. And if I am not the 'owner of the truth', I need to be permanently open. I need to be open to approach and being approached, to question and being questioned, to agree and to disagree.

Every age, every generation and every 'culture' has its built-in assumptions about reality that are generally unconscious. These assumptions invariably change with time. So, if history is any guide, much about what we take for granted about the world today simply isn't true. But we're locked into these precepts without even knowing it.

Our brain is wired in a way that we only see what we think is possible. The brain matches patterns that already exists within ourselves through conditioning.

Scientific knowledge is objective and neutral. Everything can be known and tested scientifically to produce a universal truth that is complete in itself and universal (something that anyone could see in the same way). Progress and development can be achieved through the use of science and technology to control the natural environment in order to build the perfect society.

Don't believe anything because it is written in books, because wise men say so or because your religious leader tells you to. Believe it only because you yourself know it to be true.

What we observe (even through scientific experiments) depends on the interpretation of the person who 'sees' it. Like a pair of glasses we wear, each of us has different lenses to look through at the world. These lenses determine what we see as real, ideal, true, good and bad. These lenses are constructed in our contexts - produced collectively in social interactions (in families, education, the media, religion, the government) and they are always changing. Therefore, knowledge is never objective - there is no possibility of complete 'neutrality'.

Informed Thinking

What informed your current perspective on this topic? What shapes the mainstream perspectives available to the public? Where can you find out about different perspectives? How do you make your decisions about what you think about it?

Reflective Questions

Take three minutes in silence to reflect about the following:

1. What makes you think the way you do?
2. How sure are you of what you think? To what extent are you prepared to change your assumptions?
3. Are your ideas of what is good and what is true the same as other people's or do they differ? Why do you think this happens?
4. What are the similarities and differences between what you think and what your parents think? Have you ever questioned why these similarities and differences exist?

Group Dialogue Questions

Read through the list of questions below. Are there any other burning questions you would like to add to this list? Select two 'priority' questions for discussion in your group.

1. Where does our knowledge about the world come from? For example, think about how you conceive differences to rich and poor, powerful and powerless or respect and fear.
2. Who or what shapes our understanding of what is real? For instance, would you say that what the media presents is necessarily true and neutral?
3. Do people in different parts of the world see things in the same way? Do you think there is something that is fundamentally true for everybody, regardless of where they come from or what their background is?
4. Do people relate to pain, hunger, suffering, life and death in exactly the same way? Should they relate in the same way? Who should decide? Are these relationships learned or are they 'natural'?

5. Does anyone control the sources of your knowledge? What are the dangers of this situation?
6. Do you think any group (of 'experts' for example) should have the power to decide for other people (or for everyone) what a good society is? Who should decide what a good society is?
7. Some people believe that there is a better, more developed and universal way of seeing and relating to the world (a more developed culture/set of values) – as there are more backward and underdeveloped ways of seeing as well. Do you agree with that? What are the implications of accepting that as true?
8. What can influence a scientist's analysis? What can influence what they choose to research and how they do it?

Informed Choices

You are in a seminar room with people who think that they are much cleverer than you are. They tend to agree on every issue. You don't agree with some of the things they are saying, but every time you try to express your point of view they do not listen and try to make you feel inadequate and unintelligent. Discuss: what could be the reasons for their behavior? What could be done to change this situation?

Debriefing

Think about your learning process today. What have you learned about yourself? What have you learned about others? What have you learned about knowledge and about learning? Do you feel you and other participants could express themselves in an open and safe space? What could be done to improve the learning process of the group and the relationships within the space?