

TOK Essay

Is the value of knowledge related to how easy it is to access?

As knowledge becomes widely available, free and plentiful, the quality of sources becomes more important, and the ability to synthesize that knowledge effectively becomes even more valuable. Being able to access data is no longer a rare skill, being able to do something with it is. (Lohr, Steve. 2015). The rare -and badly needed- skill is now to be able to make the distinction between reliable, useful, *valuable* knowledge and that which is none of these. In order to establish what makes some knowledge more valuable than other, we must identify criteria that will vary according to the different areas of knowledge. The prompt suggests that one reason why some knowledge is more valued than other is related to the degree of difficulty in accessing it. While this sounds right at first sight -we generally appreciate things that we acquire with much effort- there are many other criteria to measure the value of knowledge, such as its usefulness, applicability and objectiveness. In order to understand why we should not stick to the “easy-to-access” criterion alone to state whether knowledge is valuable or not, it would be important to consider the meaning of the word value itself, as unpacking the concept of “value” is crucial to establish how to assess validity, and to understand to what extent this concept can be used equally in different fields of knowledge. The arts and the natural sciences are going to be compared and contrasted in this regard.

The dictionary defines value as, “The regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth, or usefulness of something.”¹ This defines the term but it is not of much help to determine why something has value or not beyond the concept of worth -a vague concept, by the way- or usefulness. However, it casts light on the fact that there are criteria other than the easy access to be taken into consideration when claiming whether something is valuable or not. The fact that both “worth” and “usefulness” are not clearly defined either, speaks about how subjective the concept is. When determining the degree of value in things, we can identify a distinction between types of value: intrinsic value and instrumental value. Applying these concepts to the abovementioned areas of knowledge, we can claim that scientific knowledge has an instrumental value because we can apply it to practical things, whereas artistic knowledge would have an intrinsic type of value -just for the sake of it- that is, we do not expect it to serve purposes other than aesthetic or intellectual ones. Different societies and cultures give value to different types of knowledge. Some consider knowledge that has instrumental value to be superior than knowledge that has intrinsic value. The criterion is associated with practical applicability and not necessarily with how easy or difficult it is to access.

¹ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/value>

Western civilization, for example, tends to hold scientific knowledge in high regard, because of its instrumentality, reliability and rigor. There are other cultures that value religion as their most important field of knowledge, even when this kind of knowledge not always has practical applications. In the Kayapó² tribe, more importance is given to religious knowledge than to any other, as they believe the truth comes from the divine, it requires specific practices and not everyone is allowed or capable to acquire that knowledge, only the *chamanes* (tribe wise men/healers) can. This shows the importance of context when claiming that a type of knowledge is more valued than other. In this example, it is fair to say that the value is given by the exclusiveness of the knowledge, reserved only to the few, thus showing that the criterion is not how easy it is to access, but how scarce this knowledge is. The knowledge they obtain serves the purpose of healing, for example, as the knowledge that we produce and acquire in medical science; only that in their case it is religion and in ours is science. As we do not understand their process of obtaining knowledge due to our different cultural context, we put it under our paradigm, and that is something highly questionable.

My own cultural context clearly values more scientific knowledge than religious or artistic knowledge. The Western world values scientific facts because they are more objective, tangible and measurable. To this, applicability must be added as a criterion to give value to scientific knowledge. For example, an understanding of certain mathematical models may be of limited value in the abstract, but when applied to epidemiological research in medicine, they are of immense value. We cannot deny that this kind of knowledge is not easy to access, and this must count as another of the criteria used. In order to access scientific knowledge, one should have special skills or training. A network of many scientific facts has to be considered when obtaining any type of scientific knowledge, even in cases in which scientists claim to have obtained knowledge by chance or serendipity, such as Kekulé and his famous dream of the benzene structure. He could have not interpreted that dream as a ring of atoms positioned in that specific manner in a molecule, had he not known enough chemistry. Even if we could say that the worth of this particular knowledge item does not depend on the time it took to access the information -very little- the previous knowledge needed to process it must have taken a long time. Then it is fair to say that knowledge could be classified as “easy” or “hard” to obtain depending on how long the person spent in order to grasp that information, and that in the case of the natural sciences, this is one important criteria to assess the value of knowledge.

The search engine Wikipedia is one of the easiest ways to access knowledge, but does that mean that the information has quality? Many scholars and serious educational institutions are against

² Brazilian Amazonian tribe.

Wikipedia as a data source due to how easy it is to manipulate the information that it offers, so, again, the value of knowledge seems to be inversely proportional to how easy it is to access. However, Wikipedia is probably the most widely used encyclopedia and that shows that people value the fast and easy availability of information it provides over its quality or reliability. Also, in this case we can say that it is in the application that knowledge finds its maximum value, as people use Wikipedia for endless consultation.

When it comes to artistic knowledge, a person might not have spent hours studying art history and techniques, but still have a very acute and developed sensibility for emotional stimulus, and a natural talent for art. In this case, the criterion under question would not be a good measure for value. Moreover, artistic knowledge is utterly subjective, as it relies on ways of knowing that produce personal knowledge, such as emotion, imagination, perception and intuition. This seems to be the reason why it is not as valued as scientific knowledge in my own culture. Obviously, when we underestimate artistic knowledge due to its subjective nature and how easy it might be accessed, we are not taking into account other criteria to value knowledge, such as the fulfilment it might bring to human life by providing us the grounds for knowing ourselves. Art may also have a usefulness as a historical document, such as the Egyptian paintings, which help historians understand the Egyptian social distribution that explain the mindset of this ancient civilization. Something that could be discussed nowadays is that value is something temporary too. For example: when the first Egyptian papyrus were discovered, the information was highly valued. Still, artistic knowledge could be held in less regard than science because it is not considered essential for our survival. Furthermore, art could be destabilizing, as it criticizes societies in a subliminal or overt way. This can be seen in urban art such as street graffiti. Graffiti's not only serve as a voice for the society, but may also have a cathartic effect on the artist to be able to speak out his thoughts without being judged. While there are many reasons in which art could be applied, this may not be a factor that determines whether artistic knowledge is valuable or not. A factor that might make art a less valuable type of knowledge is that, due to its subjectivity, it is difficult to define what is art and what is not. We like measurable results in the knowledge we produce and/or access. Therefore, art may not be classified as less valuable than science because of how easy it is to access or not but due to how difficult is to establish that something is art. The problem is people relate value and usefulness with measurement, we do not like arbitrary assessments but clear criteria. For many people, it is tedious to discuss the categorization as art of Duchamp's "White fountain"³. It is much easier to assess the piece at face value and dismiss the knowledge it could provide us with, thus showing poor appreciation of artistic knowledge.

³ A porcelain urinal presented by Duchamp in the Armory Show in 1917. (Howarth, Sophie. 2015).

The examples examined in the sciences and in the arts show that the ease with which we access knowledge cannot be the only criterion used to assess it. It is clear that there are many other criteria (usefulness, accuracy, measurability, objectivity, etc) and that the issue is very complex, as it depends also on cultural contexts.

Words: 1583

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