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**Fall**

Theory of Knowledge Essay

*There are only two ways in which humankind can produce knowledge: through passive observation or through active experiment.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?*

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**There are only two ways in which humankind can produce knowledge: through passive observation or through active experiment.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?**

Knowledge is an essential component in human life, for it allows one to survive, to be successful, and to be a part of society. Some individuals may say there are only two methods, which aid humankind in producing knowledge: passive observation and active experiment. However, before answering whether that is true or not, I will define vocabulary that is significant for understanding my claims. First, knowledge is how individuals gain understanding, the facts, and the truth about the world; it is recognized as justified true belief. The ways of knowing which consist of language, perception, reason, emotion, intuition, faith, imagination, and memory allow individuals to justify and build upon the areas of knowledge. Passive observation is to merely recognize the various ways of knowing and the areas of knowledge through the five senses; sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. To a sense, passive observation is an alternative method to articulate perception. Lastly active experiment is when an individual conducts tests to support an idea. Although individuals tend to gain knowledge through passive observation and through active experiment, there are additional methods in which humankind can produce knowledge such as personal experience and the act of learning from others. Therefore only to a certain extent does one gain knowledge only through passive observation and active experiment. Through this work I will explore how passive observation, active experiment, personal experience, and the act of learning from others all produce knowledge, but can hinder knowledge as well.

As humans, we are particularly keen on perceiving our surroundings whether it is the food we eat or even our environment. Our observations begin to stimulate right when we are born into this world. Passively observing our surroundings is the easiest way we learn and discover the truth of our surroundings. Common-sense realism states, “That the way we perceive the world, mirrors the way the world is”.[[1]](#footnote-1) My two year old nephew is an exceptional example of a human who gains knowledge through passive observation, perception. When he was about a year old, I used my hand and said “aaja” which means come here in my Punjabi language. Since he cannot talk he uses his hand like the way I use to do to him to tell someone to follow him. My nephew also has an absurd obsession with cleaning, like vacuuming. His fascination with cleaning comes from observing those around him like his father. At such a small age he is able to perceive and understand the functions of this world, so in a sense common-sense realism, because he understands concepts like the hand movement saying “come here” and that the purpose of a vacuum is to clean. Every day through passive observation his knowledge is continuing to produce as he constantly perceives others actions. However, if an individual continues to observe the same concepts every day, knowledge is not produced; it is limited to their surroundings, in other words the allegory of the cave.

Greek Philosopher Plato’s allegory of the cave represents the idea that as humans we continue to passively observe one environment, forcing us to have fixed mindsets, which makes us fail to accept new ideas. For instance, when I went to kindergarten, my friend was home schooled. She remained in one environment and failed to understand society’s norms like how to act outside of her home, her cave. A few years later her parents enrolled her into my middle school, where she had no knowledge of the rules or how to act around other individuals. What she thought was correct was wrong in our society, because in class she continuously disrupted the teacher. Her passive observation of her fixed environment limited her knowledge and compelled her to remain in an unchanging mindset, which essentially prevented her from producing further knowledge. So we can claim that passive observation helps produce knowledge, but hinders knowledge as well.

Experimentation allows us to justify our observations, which extend our knowledge. Without actively experimenting there would be no proof for our knowledge, therefore humankind would remain oblivious. In spite of our societies believing that active experiment is directly related to the sciences, it can be utilized to test other areas of knowledge like mathematics. Goldbach’s conjecture states that if two prime numbers are added, then the outcome will be an even number.[[2]](#footnote-2) This can be actively experimented through a mathematical model for example:

1+1=2

19+31=50

13+17=30

By testing out Goldbach’s conjecture, through reason we essentially proved that he is correct and produced further knowledge about mathematics. Nevertheless like passive observation, active experiment can limit knowledge.

Active experiment can be manipulated because, through experimentation humans create false data to establish a conclusion that they hypothesized, this is known as confirmation bias.[[3]](#footnote-3) Reasoning can be blinded by what humans want as an outcome and they utilize bad reasons to justify their decision, this is known as rationalism.[[4]](#footnote-4) Creating false data essentially limits our knowledge, because it prevents us from gaining knowledge regarding the truth. So we can claim that active experiment produces and hinders knowledge.

Despite gaining knowledge through experimentations, humans need to experience what they cannot see, hear, smell, taste, or touch; we need to feel. Emotions are essential in producing knowledge, because experiments are not enough to learn. Experiencing various situations, environments, and emotions are crucial in producing knowledge. There are six primary emotions, which consist of happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this work I will focus on the emotion of fear. A few months ago I was extremely anxious about a tennis game and one night I had a horrifying dream that I missed it. I was filled with fear that I let my team down and this fear was amplified when my entire team looked at me with disgust. The continuity hypothesis states that humankind tend to dream about what they are thinking about during the day[[6]](#footnote-6), which can essentially assist in producing knowledge, because after my dream of missing a tennis game, I produced knowledge of fear, which I never wanted to experience again. Although fear in this instance produced knowledge, it can hinder knowledge as well.

In my Punjabi culture, the vast majority of individuals believe in stereotypes in the fear that if they fail to follow these ideas, they will experience an ominous event. A stereotype is a concept that has a special meaning, for example if a black cat crosses the street while you are driving it is considered bad luck. A stereotype followed in my culture is that during the week of the wedding, the bride is not allowed to leave the house. When I was little, my cousin was getting married and she left the house to go shopping. My aunt believed in the stereotype to the extent where an ominous event occurred, for my cousin got into a car accident. My aunt’s fear amplified, increasing her belief in stereotypes. This fear instead of producing knowledge, limited knowledge, because once individuals have faith in stereotypes, their minds become restricted from experiencing and feeling new environments and emotions. In this case emotion has blinded humankind, thus preventing further production of knowledge.

Our society is build upon the structure of teaching and learning. Right from the beginning we have older and wiser figures teach us how to act. Without having an older figure acting as guides, there would be no knowledge of how our society works. The Sapir –Whorf Hypothesis states that language determines our reality.[[7]](#footnote-7) This hypothesis is often critiqued because individuals believe that Whorf is stating languages have different vocabulary and grammar rules[[8]](#footnote-8), but it is valid in this claim, because I am using the hypothesis to demonstrate how languages shape our life. For example, parents teach us about manners such as opening the door for others and to say thank you. By teaching us about body and verbal language we understand how society functions. However, older and wiser figures can be narrow-minded, for example believing in the stereotypical role of women and men. In my culture women are seen as inferior and are forced to fulfill their stereotypical roles of being housewives. Since this thought is integrated into our culture, there is no knowledge of what women can contribute to our society besides taking care of their homes. And instead of attempting to overcome this unjust belief, adults continue to teach younger generations the same ideas, essentially preventing humankind from producing knowledge, because according to the belief-bias since we believe in our guides, we believe in their bias.[[9]](#footnote-9) So we can claim the act of learning from others can produce knowledge, but can also limit it.

Humankind not only produces knowledge through passive observation and active experiment, but also through personal experience and the act of learning from others. These four methods play a major role in producing knowledge, without one our knowledge is limited. Passive observation is essential to understand our surroundings and to develop our basic knowledge. Active experiment assists in producing knowledge, for it justifies or denies an idea that allows us to further gain knowledge and ensure its accuracy. Experiencing a situation is unlike observing, because no one is able to completely produce knowledge of a condition without experiencing it himself or herself. Finally, with the guidance of an older figure, humans produce knowledge of how societies functions. Through this work we can claim that passive observation, active experiment, personal experience and the act of learning from others are all methods in which humankind produce knowledge, but can hinder our knowledge as well.

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1. Richard Van De Lagemaat. Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma. N.p.: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Van De Lagemaat. Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma. N.p.: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *ibid* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. "Dreams: FAQ." Dreams: FAQ. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2014. <http://www2.ucsc.edu/dreams/FAQ/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Richard Van De Lagemaat. Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma. N.p.: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Phil, Hutchinson. "Relativism and Social Sciences (From the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis to Peter Winch)." *Academia.edu*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Nov. 2014. <http://www.academia.edu/2107751/Relativism\_and\_Social\_Sciences\_From\_the\_Sapir Whorf\_Hypothesis\_to\_Peter\_Winch\_>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Richard Van De Lagemaat. Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma. N.p.: Cambridge UP, 2011. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)