

Question :

“If the social reality is organized around the cute/dork dichotomy, then there are cute girls and dorky girls, and it would be a mistake not to recognize this. This is important social knowledge. But at the same time it is tempting to say that the cute/dork dichotomy is an illusion. It is socially and morally problematic and because it is reified through a pattern of belief and expectation, it could be undermined by a refusing to have beliefs in its terms. More generally, in cases such as this we seem to be able to generate a contradiction: it is true that p so you should believe p ; but believing p makes it true, and it would be better if p weren't true; so you shouldn't believe p .”

Sally Haslanger, “But mom, crop-tops are cute!” Social knowledge, social structure and ideology critique’. In: Philosophical Issues 17, 2007, p. 73.

Redefining Knowledge from a modern context : the perils of social reality

Introduction

What is knowledge? In a common sense, knowledge might look like a banal term : information or a fact that you can learn through experience and education. However, from a societal aspect, the word ‘Knowledge’ contains great power. Something that is declared to be a ‘knowledge’ will be used as a tool and a platform which will influence myriads of decision making processes, individual daily lives and sometimes even government policy making. Thus, it is extremely important to clarify what is knowledge and what is not; if the standard for what is knowledge is obsolete or wrong, the following consequences will be disastrous. In order to prevent such incident from happening, this essay will evaluate the relations between the JTB (Justified True Belief) standard for knowledge and social reality in order to find out which knowledge must be permitted and which should be not. Furthermore, the characteristics of the modern society and their impact to the standard for knowledge will be thoroughly discussed.

Objective

Reflecting upon past discussions in western philosophy regarding the JTB theory, two questions can be posed:

- i) Is the belief p truly reflecting the *real world*?
- ii) Regardless of whether it is *true* or not, should belief p treated as a just knowledge?

Whereas question (i) is abstract and theoretical, question (ii) is more practical and realistic. While this essay will be mentioning both topics, it will be mainly discussing about question (ii) rather than question (i). By figuring out whether the currently used

JTB model for knowledge is appropriate or not, this essay aims to suggest that redefinition of 'knowledge' is necessary than ever especially in the 21st century modern society.

Three different forms of Justification

According to the JTB theory, one 'knows' p if below conditions are satisfied:

- i) p is true
- ii) one believes p
- iii) one's belief toward p can be justified

In this section of the essay, condition i) and iii) from the above will be examined and criticised.

Firstly, condition i) does not fit the modern society since as technologies develop fastly and connection between human beings intensifies, something called 'absolute truth' has become rare nowadays. Furthermore, there are many beliefs in this world that are impossible to clearly draw a line between 'truth' and 'false'. For example, although evolutionism is supported through various scientific evidences, it is still just a 'theory' that needs to be confirmed. Therefore, condition i) needs to be reconsidered in the sense that as human intellectual level evolves and the world becomes more complex, the distinction for 'absolute truth' will only get dimmer.

However, even if condition i) has no problems, the biggest loophole of the JTB theory comes from condition iii) - the justified belief. What does 'justified' mean? Does it mean that a person should have logical reasonings for his belief? If so, to what degree should his/her reasoning be logical? Are scientific/mathematical evidences only acceptable, or the mere fact that many others believe in the same idea enough? As can be seen through above questions, there are many different types of 'justifications' that exists. In this essay, three forms of justification will be suggested and analyzed.

A. The Pragmatic justification

People who have pragmatic justification for their knowledges understand that their belief might be an illusion, however ignorantly believes in it since it is more comfortable and practical to do so. In most cases, pragmatic justifications are influenced deeply by external (mostly social) factors. Thus, when individuals who have pragmatic justifications are separated from the society and totally isolated, it is most likely that they will give up on their belief or be indifferent toward it. One example of pragmatic justification can be people believing that their government is not corrupt but clean and innocent.

While they evidently acknowledge that such belief might be wrong, they assume that it is true and decided to believe it since such attitude makes their life more simplistic and comfortable. The “cute and dorky dichotomy” in the excerpt can be also categorized as a belief that is backed by pragmatic justification since the speaker knows that it can be an “illusion” and can be “undermined by a refusing to have beliefs in its terms.” Such description implies that if external conditions that make speaker to believe in the “cute and dorky dichotomy” changes, he/she can simply undermine or abandon the idea, which shows that the speaker only believed in it for pragmatic/external benefit.

Yet, beliefs supported by pragmatic justification should be distinguished by lies in the sense that people who utilize pragmatic justification **do believe in the idea** while liars do not believe in their lies. Pragmatic justifications are only reliant on external forces and motivation and lacks **internal binding force** that will make person to believe in the idea consistently.

Impact of Knowledges supported by Pragmatic Justifications

Impacts of pragmatically justified knowledges are not severe or drastically harmful. Since these ideas automatically change when external conditions change, they are not sustainable and long-living enough to alter or manipulate social institutions.

B. Justification formed by Social Reality

Social reality refers to a reality that is created by interactions and connections between different human beings. It is different from the actual reality. When observing a phenomena, a person with the perspective based on the actual reality will try to see what *really* happened, while a person with the perspective of social reality will care more about what *people* experienced and believe in.

Justification formed by social reality is the most pervasive and frequent justification that can be seen in the modern world. Accordingly, it influences people’s lives from both short and long term, causing greater harm than the two other justifications.

People who have knowledges based on social reality justification do not even imagine that their beliefs might be an illusion. Unlike pragmatic justification, social reality justification evokes internal binding power toward the idea inside person’s mind. As a result, people who based their ideas upon social reality justification will less likely change their mind even when external conditions

change and retain their belief even when they are separated from their society.

How can such justification be formed in the first place? According to Foucault, as society progresses, it becomes more and more complicated, consisting of myriads of networks between many people. Such network works as an observer that self-motivates individuals to conform to the social norm and mainstream idea. Just like a panopticon which does not need a strong ruler or authority to maintain order, modern societies consistently inject certain ideas into its members, ultimately making individuals to internalize that specific idea. When individuals internalize the idea, it becomes a part of their social identity that can not be easily abandoned.

Examples of knowledges based on social reality justification varies : from gender stereotypes in highly conservative nations to certain scientific/mathematical/philosophical theories can fall under the category. Some might question why scientific knowledges, which are examined through experiments and calculations, are categorized as 'social reality justifications.' Yet, science and any other area of academics can be considered as a type of 'mutual agreement' between society's members from a broader perspective. Logical statements are based on premises, and there are many premises in this world that are not guaranteed to clearly reflect the *real world*. Perhaps, if there is a person who firmly believes that scientific theories are truly objective and absolute, they are the very example that shows how social reality motivated individuals to internalize their belief toward certain model or ideology.

Impact of Knowledges supported by Justification formed by Social Reality

Perhaps this section will be the most important part in this essay, since it analyzes the problems of the social reality justification in regards to the context of the modern world.

Two stark characteristics of the modern society is that it is highly globalized and digitized. Firstly, digitalization contributed in creating a more evolved and efficient network between people. Since the emergence of smartphone and mobile devices, people can easily reach out to others anytime and get access to public reaction to certain ideas or knowledges. As the network gets more efficient, people will focus more on finding ideas that will "cause least resistance within the network" rather than ideas "that truly represents the *real world*." When more connections are added to the network, more risk exists to a person who wishes to introduce ideas that are different from the currently

existing *social reality*. Thus, when the society simply assumes an ideology based on social reality justification to be a 'just knowledge,' mankind will be continuously distancing itself from the *real world*.

Secondly, globalization has led "knowledges" of different civilizations to discriminate and subvert each other. Immigrants are rapidly moving from one nation to another, mixing people from different networks. Since knowledges based on social reality have been formed through centuries, it is virtually impossible for people associated to a certain network to simply change their internalized ideas when they enter a new network. When knowledges of two different networks (civilizations) clash with each other, people from both networks will try their best to maintain order by suppressing the other knowledge or crushing other's social reality. Such incidents are not hard to spot in the real world. Nazism, Xenophobia and anti immigrant sentiments are clear cases of different social realities running into each other. Conclusively, when ideas based on social reality justification is naively allowed within the society, especially in the modern world, it is most likely that the tyranny of the majority will be created, sacrificing numerically smaller networks to be sacrificed.

C. Faithful Justification

Faithful justification is the most ideal and the strongest form of justification that can be used to manifest one's belief. The first two forms of justifications examined in this essay were grounded on practical benefits and fear of being watched by others. Contrastingly, Individuals who base their knowledge on faithful justification do not care about practical values. Rather, they choose to believe in certain ideology because they have divine faith toward it. Such ideas can be seen in many great pioneers of human history. Abraham from the bible, for example, truly demonstrated belief based on faithful justification when he decided to kill his son, Isaac so that he can follow god's commands. In common sense, killing your son with your own hands do not bring you any practical benefits, and you will be highly criticised by the network you are associated in. However, although Abraham would have predicted those consequences, he still followed his faith. The faith he followed was a genuine, pure faith toward the god that has nothing to do with secular or realistic issues. Another great example is Descartes. When Descartes doubted the reality surrounding him ultimately leading himself to the famous conclusion *Cogito Ergo Sum*, he knew that his revolutionary perspective would instantly bring him many harms rather than benefits. Yet, he decided to follow his faith because his determination outweighed every practical values that influences him.

Redefining the meaning of Knowledge

The analysis of the three different forms of justifications in the JTB theory intended to point out the loopholes of the JTB model as a framework for knowledge, especially in relation with the social reality and the panopticon. The problem of the modern society is that systematically, the world is becoming a place where unhealthy, unfiltered social reality ideas are easier to foster while faithful justification ideas are harder to introduce. The main loopholes in the JTB model that allows such phenomena are :

- i) Simply asserting that belief p must be an 'absolute truth' is naive and obsolete. There are many beliefs that cannot be categorized either as 'truth' or 'false', including the beliefs that 'believing it makes it to be true' (as written in the quote).
- ii) If the person believes p because of social reality justification, it must be acknowledged that the credibility of the justification is significantly lower compared to that of an idea based on faithful justification. This problem can be intensified under the context of the modern society, creating realistic issues including suppression of minorities or military conflicts.

Due to time constraints, this essay will not be suggesting a new framework for defining knowledge, yet it did a meaningful job in the sense that it articulated the need for change in the JTB theory.