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Paper 1 - Epistemology

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PHI 101 Introduction to Philosophy
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Writing Assignment

The focus of my paper is the philosopher Plato, he lived in Athens, Greece, founded two schools: the Platonist school of thought, and the Academy, and credited as one of the founders of philosophical thought; and writing his views on a variety of topics on reality and knowledge. I will discuss his concept on the origins of knowledge which he named “Innate Knowledge.” A key term of Plato’s concept of “Innate Knowledge” is “sense vs. form.

In Plato’s theory of “Innate Knowledge” he states that innate ideas are mental ideas present in our minds at birth – things that we know from even before birth. Two key terms in the innate knowledge idea is “sense vs. form.” Senses are defined as what we sense in the environment around us with our physical senses. Forms according to Plato, are not experiences, but realities in the environment that cannot be changed; concepts we have since and before birth. Plato further suggests that Forms are connected Forms, are the base from which senses are derived.

One who found problems with Plato’s theory of Innate Knowledge was Noam Chomsky, a philosopher and linguist. His question was, how can we know so much in a state of limited experience. As a linguist, he pointed out, language development and the ability to comprehend, speak complicated sentences and demonstrate mathematical skills is noticed in children by age four. He further points out, if children at age four, are able demonstrate this level of cognitive development, how is it that newborns use language skills so early in life and add to their knowledge banks? Chomsky titled his question, “Plato’s Problem.”

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“Plato’s Problem” has been studied by several scholars from different fields of science. But Plato addresses these issues of innate knowledge in his writing of “Meno,” in which he clearly illustrates in a dialogue with Socrates, how an uneducated boy understands geometric principles and is able to solve a problem with his own wits, (Western Philosophy and Anthology, edited by John Cottingham, pg. 11).

Epistemology is the study of knowledge and where it comes from and how we acquire it. Four approaches are presented as the way to examine and subsequently develop an explanation in the study of thoughts that turn into knowledge. Philosophical Analysis, Skepticism, a scope of knowledge and belief, and a criterion for knowledge and justification. Skepticism appeals to me the most out of these four approaches, and Rene Descartes makes the best effort in determining how to derive at the truth (Knowledge). His approach of not believing anything until it’s proven may sound problematic (believe nothing, where does faith play a part?), but at the end of “turning up every stone” he finds a “safe haven” from which he can build knowledge that he knows to be right and true; out of which he concludes and quotes, “ I am, I exist is necessarily true, whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.” (Western Philosophy and Anthology, edited by John Cottingham, pg. 25). In other words, he believes to be knowledge, what he can understand.

Justified is best defined as approved, and according to Rene Descartes, nothing is true until it is proven with fact from which one show oneself approved (25). I’m reminded of a bible verse which quotes, “...study and show thyself approved...” (2 Timothy 2:15) from which can

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conclude we can be justified in our beliefs because we have something (a knowledge) previously written, from which we can base our beliefs.

John Locke has coined the word, “experience” to explain how we accumulate knowledge and thus, know anything. Plato, however, explains that what we know about something, because it is in us, given by God. The conclusion is we know, what we know because either acquired through experience or it was given by inspiration of God. In a way, this question has the undertones of the “nature vs. nurture debate. I tend to go the nature route.

In conclusion, Plato’s dialogue in “Meno” which proved to Socrates “innate knowledge” comes from the womb, with the story of the slave boy, Rene Descarte’s, skeptic view that proves a way to the truth, and John Locke’s dogged position that knowledge can only be acquired by experience, not before birth, seem to have a piece of the right answer, as to how we acquire knowledge. However, Plato, not by virtue of being the veteran philosopher of the three mentioned above, (which may be a tendency for some to believe) but by being the most open to the reality of God, and thus closest to the truth, is the philosopher with the largest piece to the right answers as to how knowledge is attained. It is best described in The Allegory of the Cave: Plato, Republic where explains that people are in a darkness (a cave), from which they gradually descend by efforts of their intellect, come to light (truth), and thus sense God, where all knowledge is found (Western Philosophy and Anthology, edited by John Cottingham, pg. 69).