

I BELIEVE IT, AND IT IS JUSTIFIED, BUT IS IT TRUE?

One could argue that testing for truth is simply a closer examination of the nature of JUSTIFICATION, and that we never really test a belief for truth – that we simply have some beliefs that are better justified than others, and that we cannot ever prove truth. The following three truth tests, though, are useful approaches in the search for truth.

1. COHERENCE TEST FOR TRUTH (“Think!”)

“Coherence” means a clear fit of all the parts with each other within a whole. The new statement is tested by its consistency and harmony with other beliefs already held or with the body of research in an area. Mathematics uses this truth test in a demand for freedom from contradiction. Science uses it within theory. We also use it every day.

problem: Our past understanding, or the rest of the statements made in an area of knowledge, may be incomplete or flawed with error.

2. CORRESPONDENCE TEST FOR TRUTH (“Go check!”)

“Correspondence” indicates a equation between the statements we make and the world to which they refer. The statement is tested by observation. The sciences use this test in their demand for evidence. We also use it every day.

problem: Our perceptions may be limited, mistaken, or biased. Even with careful observation, we have not observed all possible cases.

3. PRAGMATIC TEST FOR TRUTH (“Does it work?”)

“Pragmatic” means “useful” or “practical.” The statement is tested by its practical benefit. The sciences use this test in considering whether a hypothesis provides useful predictions, or whether a theory works in application (The airplane flies. The medicine cures.) We also use it every day.

problem: The test is useful in practical material circumstances (e.g. engineering) but becomes highly subjective in other circumstances (e.g. It may be useful to believe that our race is superior or that God has given us the land).

If all of our truth tests have imperfections, does it follow that nothing is true? Remember that “truth” is not an object lying around in the world. It is not material; it is an idea, a concept. It can act as a guide or a goal, as we examine our beliefs. The truth tests and close scrutiny of justifications for belief may not lead us to certainty, but they may help us gain the best version possible.

There are many sources of knowledge – our parents, our schools, our religious leaders, our sports coaches and music teachers, our friends, others in our society, the media, our own experiences and thoughts . . .

perception	WAYS OF reasoning	KNOWING language	emotion
(Our senses give us our observations about the natural world and people)	(Our own thinking helps us to classify, generalize, and predict.)	(Our language gives us the beliefs and knowledge of our speech community.)	(Our feelings give us self-knowledge and understanding of others.)

How do our ways of knowing lead us to “KNOWLEDGE”?

ENGLISH provides distinctions different from those made in many other languages.

I KNOW ABOUT... many things which I do not believe. Information or data is important as justification for well-founded beliefs, but it is not itself KNOWLEDGE.

I KNOW HOW ...

to swim, to cook, to use a computer, to get along with others, to think critically ...

This kind of knowing is SKILL, whether intellectual or practical.

I KNOW THAT ... this is so.

This kind of knowledge is PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE.
It consists of knowledge claims which, expressed in language, can be examined and tested for justification and truth.

I KNOW THIS PERSON OR PLACE ...

This kind of knowing is DIRECT PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, whether of feelings or people or . . .

One standard definition of KNOWLEDGE is “*justified true belief*” – and includes ONLY propositional knowledge (“I know that...”) It takes the form of claims that can be scrutinized publicly.

1. “*I believe that . . .*”: The claim is accepted, whether with mild indifference or passionate conviction. The strength of the emotion is not what makes a belief into knowledge.
3. “*My belief is true.*” In this definition of knowledge, the claim must be able to be tested for truth via correspondence, coherence, and pragmatic tests.
2. “*My belief is justified.*”: In this definition of knowledge, only public forms of justification, such as evidence and reasoning, are accepted. The claim can’t just be “true belief” – sometimes just a lucky accident of guessing right!

“KNOWLEDGE” DOES NOT MEAN “ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY.”
OUR JUSTIFICATIONS AND TRUTH TESTS ARE NOT PERFECT.