Is knowledge power?

A cornerstone in academic thought, is the idea that knowledge is power. In a nutshell, the concept is, that through gathering information and learning about the world we live in, and the things that live and are within it, we gain power. That power, is the power to overcome ignorance. The more knowledge we have, the more power we have to spot, for instance, a lie, or an injustice. This power should then be used, to replace the lie, or the unjustness with the truth, and justness. The concept unfolds as seductively logical and simple, but is it really so?

Plato believed that we grew as people, through our insight into the truth. One would start off, at the bottom of the ladder of Eros, when one had no insight into it; when one blindly loved whatever the eyes perceived as beautiful. One could not reach the top of this ladder, before one had come to love the truth for itself. We had not reached our full potential, until we had gained the knowledge we needed to see the truth; when we had gained the power we needed overcome ignorance. In other words: This idea is far from new. It has deep roots in western philosophy and society.

One could find support for the quote in other academic circles as well. For a natural scientist, it would only make sense, that the more knowledge we have in a field, the more power we have to use that knowledge. The more knowledge we have about fuel, the more power we have to make better machines. The more knowledge we have about the human body, the more power we have to cure it of deceases. We could go on forever. And this all seems very reasonable. In this sense, I think we have to agree with the quote, that we gain the power to do things, when we have knowledge about those things. So for me, it does not make sense to criticize that point. What can we then discuss about it?

I view the relationship between knowledge and truth differently, from what the quote establishes. From the standpoint of one who agrees with the quote, we would derive knowledge from the truth. That is to say, that the things we learn, from our idea of justice, to our understanding of mathematical rules, unveil parts of the grand wall of truth. The more we unveil of this great wall, the more knowledge we have, and the more power we have. But I cannot support this idea. Before I go on to explain my point, I will try to define “truth” and “knowledge”.

I regard “knowledge”, as the facts and experiences one knows to be true. The “truth” is the more general and more covering sum of such facts or experiences. The truth is then the knowledge one knows to be true, summarized or expanded so that it creates a whole picture of the world. With my definition, the “truth” is not necessarily objective. Instead, it is the sensible way for the subject to understand, and it could very well differ from person to person.

My position is, that we do not derive knowledge from truth, but truth from our knowledge. Truth can only become knowledge, if it works within our parameters of knowledge. If not, it could fall into various other categories, such as lie, or ignorance, or stupidity, etc. We constitute truth on the basis of what we already know to be true. If something is in conflict with that, it is simply thrown away. That is not to say, that we cannot change our minds about things, or learn things that makes us change perspective. It is however, to say, that we categorize things as true or untrue. And it is to say, that we do that on the basis of what we know. In a sense, we favor old information above new. That is the core, of why we do not believe something as soon as we hear it. We do not believe we suddenly have a new age, if someone believes we are older or younger than we “really” are. If we have heard time and time again on beforehand, that we are eighteen, we do not suddenly believe we are twenty, if someone else reveals that they assumed that. And we do that, because we need to match it up with the information, the knowledge, we already have. It is true, that you are not twenty, because you already know you are eighteen. Therefore, we can categorize the claim the person made, as untrue.

As I said in a previous paragraph, I believe in separating truth from reality or actuality. Our perception of truth is highly subjective. Yet, I think there exists an objective reality, that cannot be conceived by subjective minds, such as the human. But what constitutes these restrictions on our thought and idea of truth? What holds us back from perceiving the objective reality?

The thing that stands between the subject and the objective truth is the language. And I use language in quite a broad sense. I would define it as: “Everything one understands, is understood through language. Nothing is information to us, unless it takes the form of language.” In that sense, our sight, would be a translation of the light that hits the retina, into comprehensible language. The light in itself does not make any sense, but when it is translated to sight in our brain, we can use it as information to form an understanding of the world. The same goes for all of our senses, for mathematics, and as I said, anything that we understand. If we understand something, it is because it takes the form of a language we can understand. To illustrate, I would structure the path the information takes, into three layers: The object, the language, the subject. So, the objectively real object, is translated into comprehendible information by the language, so that it makes sense to the subject. In a way, the objective truth is lost in translation.

This is in no way meant to paint the language as “the villain”. The language is the bridge that makes it possible for us, to make sense of things. Without it there would be no way for a subject to have any type of understanding. The unfortunate thing is, that the language can never keep the objectivity, when it goes into the subject. But this problem might seem a bit forced. Can we go about proving, that the language cannot keep the objectivity in the translation?

There are three restrictions, or rules, that hinder the translation from the language, from being objective. The first rule is that information has to be connected to other information, the second is that it must form categories and patterns, and the third, the final restriction, is that it can only come from one point in space and time. I will explain what I mean by that, in the order I have put forth here.

The first rule says that we must connect information to other information. What that means is that we have to put things in context, and cannot see things as they are without tying it to something else. For example, we would see hands clapping, and hear the sound of sounds clapping, and instantly, we would tie those to, in a sense, separated pieces of information together. We connect dots between different realms of perception together. The consequence of this, is that we can make connections when there are not “really” any to be made.

The second point, is that information has to be categorized and is often translated into patterns. The categorization can take form in the words that we use. When we use our verbal language, we separate for instance between men and women. Or humans and dogs. Now, the separations between men and women, might in a sense be “real”, in the sense that some people have one set of sexual organs, and another set has another. That is a real distinction. However, the fact that we have chosen to use that to categorize people is very subjective. In the same way, we separate species by whether or not they can create offspring. In that sense, the difference between humans and dogs is completely “real”, but again, the decision to use that as what separated these two groups, is very subjective. We chose, for example, not to separate between people over and under one meter and sixty centimeters, even though that difference is completely “real” as well! Certain differences are subjectively sufficient for us, to view it as different things, whereas we view others not to be. And instead of nuancing whenever there are differences between things, we fit it into the patterns which we think within. These categories of words, and their opposites, form patterns which relieves us of the task, of viewing each piece of information as something unique. It is here the problem of categorizing things as true or untrue lies. It is not more than a restriction of our system of thought, that things have to be one of the two.

The final point, is that the information we gather, has to come from a place and a time. What I mean by that, is that the information has to come from somewhere and sometime. The light we see, which we understand as hands clapping, we see from a fixed point in space in a fixed point in time. The information we gather cannot include all the angles to experience that information from, and neither can it include information from any point in time. The information can only include the light which hits the retina of the subject’s eyes, and it has to come from the point which the subject understands as “now” or “then”.

These are the factors, that in my view, means that the translation the language makes, of the objectively real world, cannot give the subject an objective understanding of the truth. It is then, as I see it, impossible to unveil “reality”, as it is written in stone, on the great wall of truth. These are the factors that mean that any truth must be a subjective one, and that it must consist of elements of what we have already established as true.

Because of the limitations the subjective mind works with, we have to limit our perceptions of the real world. I have outlined what I think are the decisive factors, but why are exactly these, the ones that limit our knowledge? The term I would use to answer that, is “power”.

As I see it, the only restriction that comes from the objective world, is the third one. The other two, are in my view, restrictions that are put in place, by the power of either the language, or the subject, or perhaps another force that is not reckoned with, in my divide in three. I would argue, that although the third factor, seems to be a purely physical restriction, the others, especially the second one, constantly change, as we change our perspective on the world; for instance, through a new use of verbal language. If we were to have a language that did not separate between humans and dogs, or indeed humans and animals, that distinction would not be true. I confidently believe, that that is a possible way to understand the world too. Because it seems to me, that none of the opposites we have in our language are unproblematic, or unchangeable. Whether it be the distinction between men and women, or humans and animals, or alive and dead, they all seem to be changeable. And what holds them in place, is the power of our systems of thought. The power that the language, maybe inadvertently, uses upon the subject.

If power is what constitutes understanding of the world, whether it be our experiences, facts, knowledge, or truth, it makes little sense talking about it as if it was able to conquer. We cannot gather enough knowledge to be more powerful than the language, because the information we gather will be constituted in the language, and what we are able to know is restricted by the power at play. We cannot, as Plato imagined, become more insightful into “The Truth”. I would call the restrictions, the laws of our thinking, the “discourse”, in much the same way that philosophers Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida did. Our discourse is decided by the “regime” of power, that is the dominant one in our culture. In the Middle Ages, the “regime” of power was the pathos-driven and Christian theology. In the modern times, it is the logos-driven scientific way of thinking. What becomes true in each of these societies is different. What knowledge one can acquire, and what language one can use, is decided by the regime of power which is in place at any given time. I would also be careful to say that it improved through history. For example, one could view the modern view of the individual as a liberating and therefore positive progress, from the traditional view that the collective was all that mattered, and that the individual did not matter much. But one could argue otherwise. One could point out, that in order for there to be a conflict, we must have an opposition. So when we started to think about people, really as individuals, we created new important opposites. This could be a problem, because if I am in a life or death situation, I am going to do all that is in my power to escape that alive. But if someone else is that situation, I am not at all going to use the same effort to save that other person, as if it was myself. The reason, is simply because I am not there in that situation. And the reason I do not understand the other person as me, is because my discourse, forces me to think of me, and other people as different. Even though they are not necessarily. Therefore, I think we cannot acknowledge more than that is has changed during the course of history. And not necessarily improved.

In conclusion, everything, from the differentiating true from untrue, and from deciding what should go within each of these categories, is a question of power. This power, and the use of it, is present, and at play, whenever there is being conveyed meaning. So what information from the objective world is going to be transformed to knowledge or truth, and how that knowledge is going to take form, is then a question of what and how the power structures allow to be turned into knowledge or truth. Ultimately, this leads to me answer “No.” to the question at hand. Knowledge is not power. On the contrary, power is knowledge.