

Activity 4. How do we know what we know? – A Greek Perspective

Instructions: The philosophers of ancient Greece, especially Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were very concerned with the nature of truth and the process by which people acquire and can be certain about knowledge. In these statements, adapted from the original quotes, they discuss some of their beliefs and questions about the nature of knowledge and how we know what we know. After you read the passages, try to clarify your understanding of what they are saying, and then be prepared to explain your views on the nature of truth and knowledge.

A. Socrates questions the existence of absolute truth in a dialogue with Cratylus

(<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/cratylus.html>, accessed June 6, 2010).

I suspect the study of what truly really exists is beyond the ability of you and me to determine. Knowledge of things does not just come from naming them. To acquire true knowledge, things must be carefully studied and investigated. One problem in acquiring true knowledge is that everything seems to be in a state of flux. If things are constantly changing, how can we claim to have true knowledge about them. Is it possible to determine whether there is some eternal unchanging nature in things?

B. Plato compares knowledge with opinion in *The Republic*

(<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.7.vi.html>, accessed June 6, 2010).

When a person looks at objects after the light of day is no longer shining, we see dimly, and are nearly blind. But when we examine objects on which the sun shines, we see them clearly. The soul is like the eye. When the soul looks at something that is true, it understands this truth and shines with intelligence. But when the truth is obscured by twilight the soul only sees opinion. It goes blinking about, and is first of one opinion and then of another, and seems to have no intelligence.

C. Aristotle discusses whether objects or truth exist independently of human

knowledge. (<http://aristotle.thefreelibrary.com/Categories/2-1>, accessed June 6, 2010). It is true that if an object does not exist, there can be no knowledge about it. There will no longer be anything to know. However, it is equally true that, an object may exist even if people do not have knowledge about it.