Knowledge Vs Opinion

As conceived by plato and mortimer adler

- What is the difference between knowledge and opinion?
- Most people believe that knowledge is more important than opinion.
- But if pressed to explain the difference between knowledge and opinion, they may find it somewhat difficult.

- If one looks at a dictionary definition of knowledge and opinion one will find the following:
- Knowledge: facts, information, and skills acquired by a person through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject.
- Opinion: a view or judgment formed about something, not necessarily based on fact or knowledge.

- Here's the problem How does one distinguish between what is presented as a true fact, or true information, or true education, from what later on turns out to be a false fact, false information, or false education?
- In other words, how does one distinguish true knowledge from false knowledge I realize this is an oxymoron?
- Another important question is it possible for knowledge and opinion to intersect?
- In other words, is knowledge always the most desirable thing, or is it reasonable to be content with some types of opinions?

- In fact, is it even possible to have absolute, unequivocal, unquestionable knowledge?
- Let's start by looking at how Plato thought about knowledge...
- Firstly, it was important for Plato to distinguish between opinion and knowledge...
- For Plato it is not inconceivable that opinion can be true...and therefore can be used as a guide...

- But the problem with opinion is that it cannot be defended...it is given and either accepted or not...
- But knowledge is different because it can be defended by logos, or reason...
- For Plato reason is embodied in the very fabric of the universe and reason is basis for discovering true knowledge reason also enables one to distinguishing between what is true and what is false.
- In other words, Knowledge is justified by way of reason.

- An opinion can become justified by showing how it can be deduced from known premises -- in other words, by applying reason to opinions.
- Plato/Socrates believed that we cannot justify any opinion unless we start from premises we know to be true.
- We need to have premises that are known to be true, absolutely and unequivocally, because otherwise it would be impossible to distinguish these premises from opinions.

- And if we use opinion as the basis for deducing knowledge, then we end up with a contradiction. How is it possible for opinions to be the basis for knowledge?
- How do we arrive at "True", absolute, and unequivocal premises?
- Clarification Premises are starting points for an argument...And assumptions are usually understood as a proposition taken for granted or accepted as true without proof. For my purposes I'm using Premise, Assumption, Proposition interchangeably.
- Plato argues that it's possible to search for and to arrive at true propositions (premises) through the dialectical process.
- The dialectical process is a method for refuting successive hypotheses until we arrive at one beyond any possible refutation.

- Thesis <> Antithesis <> Synthesis (Thesis)...
- The dialectical process can potentially lead to absolute truth with proper reasoning it enables us to attain knowledge of the universal essences that are the basis for all things that are in flux.
- According to Plato it is impossible to know things in flux because as soon as you think you know them they have changed to something else.
- In other words, for Plato if an object were to change, then what is true of it at one time could not be at a later time, thus it would not be necessarily true.

- Plato's conclusion is that the object of knowledge can never change.
- But everything in the physical world (in space and time) is changeable.
- All we can know with our senses is in the physical world.
- This means that objects of sensory experience cannot be objects of knowledge.

- If there is knowledge (and Plato thinks the example of mathematics establishes that there is) then there must be some "other world" of changeless, eternal objects.
- Plato's attempt to explain this "other world" is known as his Theory of Forms.
- The theory of Forms is the basis for distinguishing knowledge from opinion.

- It also allows for a metaphysical distinction between what is real and what merely appears to be so.
- Knowledge = Real
- **Opinion = Appearance**
- Plato makes a clear distinction between appearance & reality – they exist in two distinct worlds.

- The usefulness of appearance is that it may serve as the basis for accessing reality.
- This is the important point appearance (the world that we experience) is never good in and of itself. Its usefulness is that it has the potential to lead us to "True" knowledge.
- The world of appearance always takes a back seat to the "real" world of Forms.
- The world of appearance is "philodoxical" (in love with one's own theories or opinions)...the real world is "philosophical" (relating or devoted to the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence.)
- Here's what Plato says about this:

- "... we must make a distinction and ask, What is that which always is and has no becoming, and what is that which is always becoming and never is? That which is apprehended by intelligence and reason is always in the same state but that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is..."
- Here's what Plato thinks about people who focus on opinion instead of true knowledge:

- "So we may fairly call them lovers of belief rather than of wisdom—not philosophical, in fact, but philodoxical. Will they be seriously annoyed by that description? Not if they will listen to my advice. No one ought to take offence at the truth. The name of philosopher, then, will be reserved for those whose affections are set, in every case, on the reality."
- Is this a fair assessment?

- Isn't it the case that most of what we know is changeable and non-absolute? How many people can claim to be in possession of absolute truth?
- In fact, is there an absolute and unchanging reality of essences (Forms) that define knowledge?
- Or is knowledge always opinion?
- This is where Mortimer Adler comes into play.

- An essential idea for Adler is his distinction between knowledge and opinion...
- Knowledge is what we have absolute certainty about beyond any shadow of a doubt whereas opinions are things about which some doubts remain.
- We might be persuaded by some opinions beyond a reasonable doubt, but that does not take them entirely out of the realm of doubt some doubt lingers.
- <u>Knowledge</u> = incorrigible & immutable (uncorrectable & unchangeable)
- <u>Opinion</u> = mutable & corrigible (changeable & correctable)
- As Adler says...

- When anything remains in doubt, to even the slightest degree, it is both mutable and corrigible. We should recognize that we may change our minds about it and correct whatever was wrong.
- Based on this Adler states the key point of his essay:

• By these criteria for distinguishing between knowledge and opinion, how much knowledge do any of us have? Most of us would admit that we have precious little. Most of us are aware that in the history of science even the most revered formulations have been subject to change and correction. Yet at the same time most of us would be reluctant to say that the great generalizations or conclusions of science, those now regnant (ruling), are nothing but mere opinions. The word "opinion", especially when it is qualified by the word "mere", carries such a derogatory connotation that we feel, quite properly, that to call science opinion rather than knowledge is inadmissible.

- In contrast to Plato, Adler intersects knowledge and opinion...
- While some opinions, says Adler, are definitely not knowledge, there are certain types of opinions that can easily intersect with knowledge:
- The solution, it seems to me, lies in recognizing the sense in which the word "knowledge" signifies something that is quite distinct from anything that can be called an opinion, and the sense in which a certain type of opinion can also quite properly be called knowledge. That would leave another type of opinion, quite distinct from knowledge, which should properly be called mere opinion.

INCORRIGIBLE KNOWLEDGE	CORRIGIBLE KNOWLEDGE	MERE OPINION
-Very few examples	 Opinions that have sufficient probative force to justify our 	 Asserted without any basis at all in evidence or reason.
-Often self-evident	claiming at the time that the opinion affirmed is true	-Our personal prejudices are such
-A self-evident truth is one that	Pacad on avidence available	mere opinions.
which it is impossible to think.	-based on evidence available	- Often true of the beliefs we harbor
That a finite whole is greater than	-May turn out to be false, or in need	and cherish often without evidence.
-Inat a finite whole is greater than any of its component parts and that each part of a finite whole is less than the whole are self-evident, necessary truths.	of correction or alteration at some future time when new evidence and other reasons come into play – this is how science works. -This is knowledge that has a future	- With mere opinions we should never say that we know, but only that we believe the mere opinion that we are holding on to.
-All bachelors are unmarried men.	that may require it to undergo correction or alteration or even	
-The shortest distance between two points is a straight line.	rejection.	
-One plus one is two		
-All triangles are three-sided planes.		
-There can be no diagonals in - triangles, as there can be in squares		

- After laying out the distinction between Incorrigible, corrigible, and mere opinion, Adler goes on to a discussion of Hume, Kant, and Locke and the basis for knowledge that each articulates in their philosophy.
- Adler attempts to show that each of these philosophers has made some significant mistakes in their philosophical constructs when it comes to the question of what constitutes knowledge.
- Going into the details of his arguments for each philosopher is far beyond what's possible in this short presentation, but I do recommend reading the book Ten Philosophical Mistakes for a more in-depth explanation.

- Here are some possible questions for us to tackle during the discussion:
- Is it possible to have absolute knowledge about empirical (and mutable) reality?
- Are Plato's Forms necessary for absolute knowledge?
- Do you agree that science is a kind of opinion or to use Adler's terminology "Corrigible Knowledge"?
- Is there ever any value to "Mere Opinion" or is it by definition something to mistrust and avoid?
- Is there a difference between evidence gathered through the scientific method versus personal evidence gathered through life experience? Does one lead to more knowledge than the other?