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“The quality of knowledge is best measured by how many people accept it.” Discuss this claim with reference to two areas of knowledge.

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Typically, the purpose of having a body of people review knowledge is to ensure that it is true or valid. However, most of the time, quality of knowledge is based on its usefulness, not its truthfulness; truthful knowledge only has a purpose if it is useful. And, if it was based on truthfulness, then it could either be absolute truth or could be false—not in between. But quality is not binary like truthfulness. Because usefulness is subjective, so is quality of knowledge. Thus, it is important to consider the claim from multiple perspectives.

When considering natural sciences as an area of knowledge, there are two perspectives based on ways of knowing that one can take: that of deductive reasoning, and that of inductive reasoning. In 4th century B.C., Plato and his student Aristotle deduced a geocentric model of the universe based on their observations in the night sky. It argued that the Earth is a sphere in the center of the universe, and that stars are on giant crystalline spheres revolving around the earth at different uniform speeds and directions¹. Of course, this model has been long-disproven. Classical Greek philosophers only cared about astronomy because it was useful for astrology,

which they believed had an influence on the natural world and could unlock the secrets to good fortune or luck. The knowledge of the model was accepted as quality knowledge at the time not because it was true, but rather because it accurately described the observations of the astrologists. It did not matter whether or not the model was correct. Although some may argue that it is no longer considered quality knowledge because it is known to be false, this is simply missing the point. When the model was developed, it was false, but it was useful, and therefore it was quality knowledge. Time is not a factor. Unlike the scientific method, the supersession of scientific theories takes an inductive approach. For example, point two of John Dalton's Atomic Theory states that atoms of a given element are identical in size and mass². Frederick Soddy rendered Dalton's theory obsolete in 1914 when he discovered the existence of isotopes³, which have a varying number of neutrons for a given element and therefore a varying mass. Soddy disproved Dalton's theory using inductive reasoning to identify exceptions. The scientific method suggests that the more scientists accept a theory, the higher-quality the knowledge is. But if not for scientists like Soddy who were doubtful of Dalton's theory, the quality of the knowledge would not have improved; that is, the more scientists are skeptical of some scientific knowledge, the higher the quality it will be. In my Theory of Knowledge classroom, students are supposed to share their opinions on a topic. The goal is for students to bring up points that are different than those brought up by the others, because it further develops the shared knowledge on a topic. Similar to in natural sciences, it is uninteresting when two individuals bring up the same point or share an opinion on a subject, and it does not develop the discussion or knowledge. Hence, the quality of shared scientific knowledge is best measured by how many people do not accept it.

But again, it depends on perspective. While for natural sciences usefulness is the main characteristic of high-quality knowledge, truthfulness is the main characteristic in ethics. When deciding whether or not an individual is or is not guilty of a crime, quality of knowledge is very important—hence the purpose of a judicial jury. A jury must either reach a unanimous agreement or have the overwhelming majority of members lean towards one side and veto the dissenter. Because ethics has a moral, subjective basis, it is necessary to determine the highest quality consensus through the combined opinions of a jury. For trial by jury in a federal court for civil cases in the United States, a minimum of six jurors is required⁴. But for criminal action, in states in which the death penalty is decided by a jury, there is a requirement for at least ten members⁵. As the death sentence is of higher severity than any penalty resulting from civil action, a higher-quality consensus is required. Consequently, there is a higher requirement for the number of members. Trials by jury implicitly follow the doctrine of motive utilitarianism in normative ethics; the higher-quality shared knowledge is based on the combined personal knowledge of many jurors, each of whom has the interests of the majority in mind. Or, that is the goal. In 1969 in racially-divided Republic of South Africa, the jury system was abolished because, in the system, the jurors were nearly all white, and were inherently prejudicial to defendants who were not white⁶. Most of the members of the jury had agendas that were not based on motive utilitarianism, so their decisions would not reflect the highest quality knowledge as they should have. In this case, the quality of knowledge was not the highest when more people accepted.

So, for the areas of knowledge of natural sciences and ethics, there are many different possible positions one can take on the claim. Quality of knowledge in natural sciences is higher when more people are skeptical of it. But in ethics, quality of knowledge could either be lower

when more people accept the knowledge or could just not be affected by the number of people who accept it. If ethics is an exception to usefulness being the primary characteristic of quality knowledge, then it begs the question: are there other areas of knowledge in which the truthfulness of the knowledge is more significant?

Citations:

- 1: <https://www.universetoday.com/32607/geocentric-model/>
- 2: <http://www.iun.edu/~cpanhd/C101webnotes/composition/dalton.html>
- 3: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/chemistry/1921/soddy/facts/>
- 4: https://www.law.cornell.edu/rules/frcp/rule_48
- 5: <http://alisondb.legislature.state.al.us/alison/searchableinstruments/2017RS/bills/SB16.htm>
- 6: <https://constitutionallyspeaking.co.za/do-we-need-a-jury-system/>