

Can new knowledge change established views or beliefs?

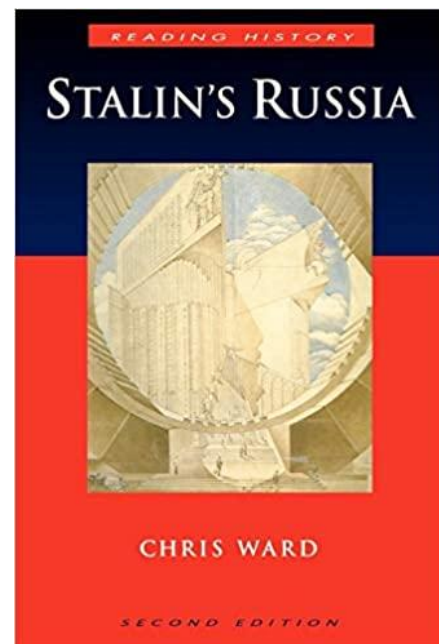
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Theory of Knowledge Exhibition

The prompt I have chosen is: “**Can new knowledge change established views or beliefs**”. I will be exploring this using the themes of language and knowledge and the knower to develop my thinking that new knowledge can change existing views, but can also coexist alongside our original mindset. In a world as fast-paced as ours today, this prompt is considerably relevant because we are constantly forced to question our views and beliefs due to the influx of new knowledge that we receive daily. With reflection and responsibility we can use this to alter our established beliefs and become more mindful knowers.

‘Stalin’s Russia’ by Chris Ward (Language)

This book by Chris Ward, a lecturer at the University of Cambridge¹, is an example of how new knowledge has changed established views. Ward originally wrote ‘Stalin’s Russia’ in 1993, before the Soviet archives were widely available, and so his view on the nature of Josef Stalin’s regime in the USSR was vastly one-sided due to the predominantly Western perspective. Once he had gleaned what knowledge he could from the new sources revealed in the Soviet archives, he published a second edition to his book in 1999 to correct his chapter on late Stalinism, because as he stated, “the Western concept of totalitarianism had an overtly anti-Soviet bias²”, and was almost



¹ ‘Stalin’s Russia’. Bloomsbury. Accessed 6 May 2021.
<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/stalins-russia-9780340731512/>

² Ward. C. ‘Stalin’s Russia’. 1999 Hodder Arnold. P. 225.

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exclusively likened to George Orwell's novel '1984' with little evidence to justify these conceptions. Once the archives were released, Ward was able to use the new knowledge to delve into significantly more detail on the Russians' attitude towards Stalin, and the increase in Stalin's own paranoia towards the people closest to him. This gives a clear example of how new knowledge has completely changed established views, and shows the importance of language because it was through the rare accounts of normal Russian people that Ward was exposed to a wider perspective on how Stalin was viewed. His acknowledgment that he wasn't correct in his first version also shows the maturity required to admit that sometimes we do have bias and preconceptions of an area of knowledge, and when new sources of information become available we should grasp the opportunity to expand our views.

My zodiac dreamcatcher (Knower)

Astrology has fascinated humans for millennia, and the knowledge of 'zodiacs' and 'horoscopes' has been passed down through generations since 1894BC³, capturing the imagination of people even today with the idea that your life's path can be predicted due to the arrangement of stars. A dreamcatcher with my zodiac sign has hung in my window ever since I was little, and with knowledge gained through bedtime stories and the spread of information on social media, I carry the belief that since I was born in late September,



I share characteristics with every other person with the zodiac sign of a libra. However, with new knowledge and understanding of the science of astrology, no logical evidence to this

³ 'The history of zodiac signs: where do they actually come from?'. The fanscotian. Accessed 6 May 2021.
<https://thefanscotian.com/11314/uncategorized/the-history-of-zodiac-signs-where-do-they-actually-come-from/>

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practice can be provided⁴. Yet millions of people still choose to share these beliefs, showing that new knowledge does not always wholly change established views because people can choose to ignore it. This introduces an alternative dimension to my debate because although new knowledge can change established views and beliefs, as shown by Chris Ward's 'Stalin's Russia', it can also coexist alongside instead of outrightly replace old knowledge. This is particularly relevant to our society today because with the immense amount of new knowledge produced daily, the question of what to do with old knowledge is brought about. In many cases old knowledge should not be so simply dismissed because we can still learn from the original values behind it. For example, this intense belief that our entire lives can be dictated for us by the stars opens up truths about the human race itself, namely our dependence on needing perspective for the future.

'Chinese Colloquialised' podcast: Episode 49 (Language)

China is an incredibly diverse country rich in many traditions and beliefs, which often attract stereotypes and preconceptions from the West due to the sheer differences in culture. By listening to this podcast - which discusses the important Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋节) and some of the core traditions that surround it - in Mandarin Chinese, a unique opportunity is offered to gain a greater understanding of Chinese culture not only through the gain of new knowledge about the festival, but also by hearing the Chinese language itself. By learning Chinese and listening to it, the beautiful intricacies of the language become more apparent and the extent to which one can



⁴ 'Is astrology real? Here's what science says'. Scientific American. Accessed 6 May 2021. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-astrology-real-heres-what-science-says/>

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understand the true purpose of 中秋节 is deepened. For example, the phrase ‘团圆饭’, which roughly translates into ‘family reunion meal’, offers more knowledge of Chinese values during the festival because the combination of the individual characters 团 (society) and 圆 (circular) show the importance of cohesion and closeness of family. Through learning a new language, we gain new knowledge about the culture and attitude of the country we are studying, and this changes pre-existing views or beliefs we may have about that country. In the case of China, where its one child policy has created a general attitude by the West that the country does not value family as highly, these misconceptions can be adjusted via thorough study of its language and customs. It can be argued that only by learning a country’s language can one truly immerse themselves into its culture, and this indicates that any stereotypes we carry regarding the country before our education of its language are not valid until seen from an insider’s perspective. This links back to my first object and convincingly demonstrates that new knowledge can change established views or beliefs.

Word count: 948.

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Image 2: Author's private image. Taken January 2020.

Image 3: 'Chinese Colloquialised'. Accessed 6 May 2021. Spotify.