

Unit 1 Decoding knowledge

subjective certainty. In other words, when I say I know something, I am claiming to be certain about it. But if we cannot be certain what we mean by knowledge, how can we claim to *know* anything?

Task: activity

- 1 Identify one or two examples of knowledge claims made in each of your IB subjects.
- 2 Do they have anything in common?
- 3 Can your examples help you to identify more precisely what we mean by knowledge?
- 4 Is there a link between the certainty of a knowledge claim and the area of knowledge it comes from?

Task: think about

There are many answers to the question 'What is knowledge?' One answer put forward by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato is that knowledge is 'justified true belief' (although Socrates refutes it in Plato's *Theaetatus*). What are the strengths and weaknesses of this definition?

The example of the Apollo 11 moon landing illustrates the difficulty of certainty. Although there may be an enormous body of evidence to support the truth of the claim that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon, there is a considerable minority of people who, for various reasons, believe that this evidence is insufficient and unreliable. Unless we have privileged access to the evidence, or were personally involved in the Apollo mission, our claim to know that it happened ultimately comes down to 'whom do we trust?'

Plato's definition of truth, '**justified true belief**', is rather circular. We may call certain propositions knowledge because we have good reasons to believe them to be true (in other words they are justified beliefs) but this does not overcome the difficulty of how we know them to be true.

For example, I may believe I hear my dog barking in the garden. I may be justified in believing this because I have a dog who has a deep bark just like the bark that I can hear. But I can only say that it is true that my dog is the dog that was barking if I know for a fact that it is indeed my dog barking, and not the dog next door or any other dog that may be passing by my house. Hence I must know it to be *true* before I can claim to *know* it.

If I claim to *know* my dog is barking, my claim is based on a justified belief, which may or may not be true. Nobody would want to define knowledge as 'justified *false* belief' so it is hard to see what essential role the word *true* plays in the definition in this case.

There are times when we may want to make a knowledge claim about some future event. For example, I might claim to know that the 2016 Olympic Games will be held in Rio de Janeiro. My belief is justified by the media reports that have declared Rio de Janeiro was selected to host these games by the International Olympic Committee. If, in 2016, Rio de Janeiro does indeed host the games, my knowledge claim will be validated as true. Does that mean I can claim to *know* the venue for the 2016 games now?

justified: shown to be fair, right or reasonable

true: logically consistent, honest, correct or accurate

belief: a feeling that what you think is true

