

May 09

8. To understand something you need to rely on your own experience and culture. Does this mean that it is impossible to have objective knowledge?  
Risha Dipak Vithlani, International School Moshi

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Candidate Number: 000032036  
International School Moshi  
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## **To understand something you need to rely on your own experience and culture. Does this mean that it is impossible to have objective knowledge?**

We tend to act as if we do have objective knowledge, but in my final analysis I will explain why I think we don't actually have it. I will consider two styles of 'objective knowledge'; one, objective *judgment*, is knowledge which has evidence sanctioning it. The other, objective *knowledge*, is to do with an 'objective reality' where a thing exists as itself, meaning that it is independent of our perception of it (Mulder 2006).

I think that the implication of understanding something through culture results in inherently biased knowledge because culture and tradition tend to define our "intellectual default settings" (Lagemaat, 2005, p. 31). Our culture trains and strongly influences our ways of knowing. For example, slavery is considered a "traditional part of Niger society" (Author Unknown, 2004); Nigerien slave owners know and accept slavery as the norm. Nigerien culture informs them of castes born to be slaves and hence practice modern-day slavery. My own culture provides me with a subjective perspective that slavery should be condemned; I find it difficult to understand where the Nigerien slave owners are coming from as I simply cannot accept slavery because of what I understand from my culture. As for the slaves themselves? I have never experienced what they are going through; therefore no matter how much I can empathize with them, I cannot ever fully know it and have objective knowledge of their position. A lot of knowledge is to do with the way one is raised, their culture background and emotional ties to certain principles, and in this case, I can accept that my knowledge is subjective, but I still condemn the practice of slavery as being wrong.

Assuming that all my understanding *is* dependent on my own experience and culture implies that all my knowledge must be personally biased as I am naturally inclined to be attached to my own beliefs. The logical question now is is it ever possible to have objective judgment? I think that the areas of knowledge that transcend culture are limited to the natural sciences and mathematics. The fact that I am a female born and raised in Tanzania will not affect the property of reflection of a light-beam; its angle of incidence will equal its angle of reflection. A Swedish friend of mine will also find this in reflection. Both of us can acquire our judgment through the same scientific method, and we can both accept the reflective property as our respective cultures and experiences do not prevent us from doing so. Ergo culture and experience are unable to distort this objective judgment; we treat it as objective as it is irrespective of culture.

From my experience I find that it is possible to be impassive about concepts such as the properties of waves. A fault in this argument is that it does not mean that knowledge about the natural sciences or mathematics cannot be subjective; I think it depends on the nature and the particular knower. For example, knowing that the dot of this letter 'i' can hold about 500,000,000,000 protons (Bryson, 2003, p.

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37) leaves me in absolute awe; my roommate, contrariwise, is unmoved by it. This shows that the perspective of the individual knower is significant. The knowledge in this case is objective, and the reaction to it subjective.

A valid argument for objective judgment, demonstrated by simple mathematics is:

$$1+1=2$$

This seems to hold true, irrespective of who you are and where you are on Earth, ergo it could be argued that this is objective judgment; it has also been proven mathematically (Whitehead and Russell, 1910, p. 379) and using our reason, logic and senses, we know that it is true, and there are no emotions involved.

As compelling as the argument of  $1+1=2$  for all cultures is, I feel that the following counterclaim bears more weight; the answer is only '2' if I am to believe that language has precisely and completely captured the essence of what '2' is in the real world. Say for example I count the number of apples on a table; all I do is add the 'second' apple to the 'count'; nothing to do with the actual apple itself in its objective reality (EricK, 2008). Also, it could be argued that mathematics itself – 'Ding-an-sich', the thing itself, (Mulder, 2006) is objective, but the symbols, numbers and alphabets we use for mathematics are arbitrary and subjective – my perception of what 'two' is could be entirely different from yours due to the differences in our experiences and cultures. Another issue also arises when different languages from different cultures are used for '2'; what if they capture different essences of it?

The most credible opposition that I have heard to this way of thinking is pragmatism. As humans, for practical purposes, we have identified with each other and have seemed to come to an agreement on some levels of knowledge, such as the number '2'. It is arguably the most convenient path for us to take in order to move on with life. In other words, it is easier to accept '2' for what it is, rather than constantly philosophizing about it and sooner or later being taken away to a mental asylum.

A further argument supporting that knowledge comes from culture and experience and is subjective comes from studies on the Amazonian Pirahã tribe. They have "no sense of number" (Highfield, 2008). Counting is not useful in their culture and consequently it makes sense that they have not picked it up. They only have words for 'one', 'two' and 'many'. In an experiment where they were asked to count 10 objects, they used 'hói', their word for 'one' to signify a quantity up to 4 and their word for 'two' for as many as 5 or 6 objects (Dingfeldere, 2005). They did not actually count – they just signified relative quantities. I interpret this as their understanding derived from culture; their lifestyle does not require them to know about the existence of exact quantities we call numbers, strengthening the idea that numbers are subjective. I think that the Pirahã are almost prevented from wondering about the existence of such a thing as there is no use for numbers in their culture and therefore in their everyday experiences. If they have never come across the concept of quantification and simply do not need to quantify anything, then how are they to abstractly dream up numbers? Quite frankly, this thought scares me. It makes me wonder about the prospect of all sorts of vital concepts and objective knowledge that

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mankind has not yet grasped or even imagined possible merely because we have not encountered an experience with the knowledge.

This leads me to my point about knowledge of objective reality; one interpretation of objective knowledge. 'Ding-an-sich', mentioned earlier, is Immanuel Kant's expression for designating pure objectivity, where the object is as it is in itself, rather than what it is perceived to be. This is because using our senses to perceive something limits our knowledge to what our body tells us what it is, not letting us know what something really is. When I see the color red, it is a subjective perception on the part of my senses, whereas for objective knowledge of this 'color' what has to be considered is what it is to be 'red'. What I see as 'red' is actually more than just red; the reality of this 'color' is essentially electromagnetic radiation travelling in the form of visible light, with all frequencies of the 'visible light spectra' being absorbed except for those that appear 'red' to me; perception can be misleading. This I learnt in physics in the ninth grade, and I recall my initial reaction to this being 'I wonder if some people are able to switch their vision so they see frequencies and electromagnetic waves instead of plain old color'. The implication of this is that I experience the color red; and hence it is impossible to have objective knowledge of the color as I am limited to my senses.

John Locke asserts that we can have objective knowledge about objects, such as the frequencies and other *real object* constituents of the 'red', which are, funnily enough, nothing like what we perceive them to be. The incident that we are able to learn about an object's reality (ding-an-sich) through science permits us to discover objective knowledge to transcend all bias, be it cultural or experiential. (Mulder, 2006).

Of course, what would the world be without skepticism? Kant's response to this uplifting and promising acquisition of objective knowledge is depressing me. He says that even this supposed knowledge about the ding-an-sich is only knowledge of the nature of things as they appear to us. This translates to my 'objective' knowledge about the electromagnetic waves (rather than color) also being a perception; I am still not seeing the actual red for what it is, for it is not those waves (Mulder, 2006). This means that even the frequencies are just a perception; in reality, they might be something completely different and it is impossible for me to know about it.

I feel that the arguments presented above more strongly support the idea of biased understanding derived from culture and experience. However, when it comes to objective reality, Kant's argument is very compelling, but I think that the human race functions better if it ignores this inconvenient truth. This is because from Kant's perspective, nothing we know will ever be reality; our attempts at identifying the reality such as waves and frequencies can still only be perceptions. I think that the answer to the prescribed title is a difficult one as it fluctuates with the type and use of knowledge, but in most cases I think we superimpose objectivity onto it for practical purposes.

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