

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?

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Theory of Knowledge
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One can attempt to define objective knowledge in various ways. One definition could be that it is a part of the external world where knowledge is free from one's own mind and internal world. Another possible definition is that objective knowledge is something that is globally agreed upon, and therefore transcends culture. The title of this essay implies that the presence of culture and experience, and the way they influence how we perceive reality, prevents us from having an objective standard of knowledge. Culture and experience are considered subjective because they shape emotion, thus personal acquaintance. The subject area and content of a discipline determine the degree of personal understanding needed to "know" something. Tools to pursue objective knowledge vary depending on the subject and the methods available to explore it, and when applying them one often runs into problems. This should however, not deter us as critical thinkers and we must not dismiss the existence of objective knowledge in our reality, or give up our attempts in its pursuit.

In ethics for example there do seem to be intrinsic "human" moral standards such as the sanctity of human life, the goodness of honesty, and the golden rule that states "do as you would be done by." These standards appear to be at first sight a common factor in the communal lives of various cultures, aimed to ensure the survival of the group. When one scrutinizes the issue more closely one detects however that the priorities of cultures are often different, as are the methods by which each culture goes about ensuring group survival. Therefore discrepancies with another society's concepts of the ethical norm are bound to arise. This proves that ethical values – even the ones that seem to be at first sight "objective" can be differently perceived and interpreted. Take one of the fundamental moral tenets, namely that to kill another human being is immoral, this rule is

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often put to the test according to culture and context. The context where this seemingly absolute moral value becomes relative very fast, is the event of war where the killing of a fellow man may be acceptable. War is after all governed by different sets of rules that are not applicable in ordinary life.

Looking back at recent history in particular the Rwandan genocide, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War we are presented with cases in which the moral standards of one's own culture were not followed when dealing with those outside it. Going back to the murder example, we see how in these conflicts language was used to reinforce negative perceptions to isolate and 'de-humanize' perceived enemies i.e. "Tutsi" cockroaches, Vietnamese 'gooks', and Iraqi 'rag heads'. Through the association of these derogatory terms with the enemy the moral threshold was lowered, and the ordinary knowledge that one has murdered another human being was deflected into a notion of killing a pest or alien.

If we thus determine that objective knowledge in Ethics is impossible, we are left with moral relativism i.e. ethical values change with the context in which they are applied. The recent atrocities in Tanzania involving the murder of albinos highlight one of the dangers of moral relativism. Albinos were being attacked as their body parts are considered by witchdoctors to hold mystical properties that can make a person rich. Those responsible for the killings seem to be justifying themselves according to their own morals that allowed them to kill albino's as they considered them not only different, but also inferior to them. The normal moral standards of the society did therefore not apply to them. In Tanzania – as in other countries - albinos are perceived as 'different' because of

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their lack of pigmentation of the skin; these people now live in fear (“Living in Fear: Tanzania’s albinos”).

It consequently seems that most ethical standards are derived from emotions such as empathy which are not objective as they depend on subjective perceptions and reactions to them. Objective ethical standards may however be possible when applied to concepts such as moral absolutism; where an action is wrong or right regardless of culture. According to Immanuel Kant it is possible to have such moral standards that are reason based (Johnson). The Universal Declaration of Human rights lends itself as an example of a covenant that attempts to reach some sort of objective knowledge with regards to the natural rights that every human being is entitled to claim.

However, this list of rights has to be understood in a context of culture and experiences. For instance, the word ‘family’, addressed in Article 16 of the declaration, evokes emotions, as well as it does create objective understanding which is based on genetic, or marriage relationships (“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights”). Language affects the way in which the family is perceived, as once the concept comes to mind a western perspective tends to visualize a close knit smallish unit obliged to protect and love each other, but the knowledge of who is a family member and who is not varies widely depending on where one finds itself. In traditional Kenyan culture for example one is obliged to extend help to relatives westerners would call “distant” or not even emotionally recognize as family members, such as second or third cousins. Westerners rarely even know those related so remotely to them, and tend to maintain ties with immediate family members only. Therefore it can be said that the notion of family is

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subjective to culture. It is thus evident that the understanding of family is strongly influenced by culture, and is consequently subjective.

When trying to understand other concepts of knowledge such as those in the natural sciences we are presented with methods to explore knowledge that attempt to ensure at least some form of objectivity. Assuming, that is, we deal with objectivity defined as both being something globally agreed upon and existing in the external world, thus managing to transcend culture. For example the requirements for a theory in the natural sciences to be considered scientifically credible are that the theory has to fit with proven facts, overlap with other known scientific theories, have little or no contradictions, and it has to be testable, therefore falsifiable (Davies 8). Karl Popper had said that taking the risk to falsify a scientific theory is what strengthened the theory's authenticity (Van de Lagemaat 236). The scientific theory also must not rely only on supernatural explanations. This is why theories such as creationism/intelligent design, and the Lamarckian theory are rejected in the field of natural sciences. Creationism is not falsifiable, and the Lamarckian theory does not correspond with biological knowledge that we have now (Davies 8).

Other examples of objective knowledge that are independent of culture in the natural sciences are found in chemistry. The mixing of elements hydrogen ($2H_2$) and oxygen (O_2) will always result in the formation of water ($2H_2O$). This is represented in the formula $2H_2 + O_2 = 2H_2O$. Although the formula is 'objective', one can argue that personal experience deepens one's knowledge of this chemical reaction. By watching the combination of the gases, and witnessing the creation of liquid water from the two, what occurs is that the written symbols from the page move into the external world. Since

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physical reality is assumed to be distinct from personal thoughts scientific laws, terms, and formulae arguably are an effort to stipulate objective global agreement on physical facts. In the case of the example of oxygen and hydrogen creating water, what is observed occurs outside of ones self or a culture, and presents us with the possibility of objective knowledge.

In the same way that scientists use a theory as a means for offering an objective explanation to certain events, mathematicians rely on logical reasoning based on accepted definitions and axioms (theorems and postulates), to deduce conclusions that are globally agreed upon. Pure mathematics does not require the application of a formula to a physical event a knower perceives, or an inner experience a knower might have. However, although math meets the criteria to be globally acceptable, it is based on the process of deduction which takes place in the ‘inner part’ of one’s mind without having an external reference. Therefore, math meets one element of objectivity, yet fails to match with the other.

The degree of objectivity derived from either external reality, or global agreement varies depending upon what one wishes to know: whether it is the ‘right’ thing to do, who to consider ‘family’, how oxygen and hydrogen combine to produce water, or how reliable the Pythagorean Theorem might be. Although the certainty of an answer is emotional, it should result from good reasons, which others accept. This restricts knowledge then to claims that are closer to objectivity than individually subjective. Even though absolute objectivity may not ever be reached we can still discover ways in which to be as objective as possible in our approach to knowledge.

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