

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?  
Anna-Lee Folk, St Paul's Grammar School

# Theory of Knowledge Essay

## Chosen Essay – Essay 8

To understand something you need to rely on your own experience and culture. Does this mean it is impossible to have objective knowledge?

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To understand something you need to rely on your own experience and culture. Does this mean it is impossible to have objective knowledge?

Answering this question requires an exploration of the initial statement; “To understand something you need to rely on your own experience and culture”. This exploration will lead to an acceptance of this initial statement as being valid in many but not all cases. A clear definition of objective knowledge and understanding is also required. It will be shown that objective knowledge does not have a clear definition and it depends on the definition adopted as to whether or not it is possible to have objective knowledge despite relying on your own experience and culture to help understand that knowledge.

“Understanding” implies an ability to grasp the meaning of something. Your senses pick up the stimuli of a chair but your brain must add meaning to the stimuli in order for understanding to be achieved. An understanding of language<sup>1</sup> (developed through experience and culture) allows you to add meaning to the stimuli; it is “a chair”. A more in-depth grasp of meaning develops from your personal experience with chairs and the cultural norms you associate with chairs. These, through reasoning and emotion, may allow you to know that you can sit on a chair and that sitting on a chair can be pleasant or unpleasant depending on the context and type of chair.

Defining objective knowledge is not easy as “objectivity versus subjectivity” is a hot topic of debate in philosophy. Two definitions have been chosen to highlight the contrary views on the existence of objective knowledge. Calise (2003) says: “Objective means having reality independent of mind: relating to or being an object, phenomenon, or condition in the realm of sensible experience independent of individual thought. Most of what we consider to be objective knowledge is actually subjective. It is either one person’s or a group of people’s perception of an objective fact” (Calise, G 2003, P.10). Calise argues that even objective facts that exist outside of us, (like a chair), only become knowledge if they are perceived by a

<sup>1</sup> In the essay the term “language” will be taken to mean any form of language – verbal and non verbal (visual signing, tactile signing, Braille, written, pictorial etc) as long as there is some symbolic representation of objects and concepts.

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person. If you accept Calise's definition then it is impossible to have objective knowledge, for as soon as one perceives a stimulus it becomes subjective in nature as it relies on the person's subjective interpretation based on experience and culture to understand this stimulus. Popper, alternatively defines objective knowledge as "knowledge that has become the possession of society...expressed in propositions<sup>2</sup>" (Tomkins, J, 2004, P.40). Based on this definition it will be shown that objective knowledge is possible even if you have relied on your own experience and culture to understand that knowledge.

So can understanding and objective knowledge be gained independently of your experience and/or culture? Rationalists argue that some understanding and objective knowledge is gained "by 'a priori' reasoning" independent of your "sense experience or observation". (St Paul's Grammar TOK Resource Booklet and <http://www.theology.edu/logic/logic4.htm>). For example: "All round balls are round". Rationalists claim this statement is a true community held proposition understood and established independently of any experience of it and through reasoning alone. You don't need to have experienced "all round balls" to know and understand that this statement is true. Thus, based on rationalist's views and Popper's definition of objective knowledge I could argue that you don't need to rely on your own experience of something to gain understanding or to obtain objective knowledge. However, this argument would not be valid if I was trying to claim that reasoning occurred here without any reference to sensory experience; as in this particular process of reasoning I have used communication (a learnt cultural sensory experience) to input the statement into my brain and for me to express my reasoned understanding that this statement is true. So, how much of your understanding relies on your own experience and culture?

It can be argued that most of your understanding is developed by using your own experience and culture to help you develop this understanding. Studies show; "A baby's brain is a work in progress. The outside world shapes its development through experiences that a child's senses absorb" (Brotherson, S 2005 <http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/pubs/yf/famsci/fs609w.htm>). As soon as others begin to interact with a newborn baby, cultural practices, behaviors and experience

<sup>2</sup> Propositions in philosophy can be defined as statements that can be either stated as being true or false ([www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)). "Propositional knowledge is information that something is or is not the case" (Tomkins, J 2004, 40)

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will begin shaping the baby's brain; the tool for understanding. Based on these findings it can be argued that after a baby's initial experience of the world its subsequent understanding will, if nothing else, use previous sensory and cultural experiences as benchmarks and a framework to help develop new understanding.

So, do I exclusively only need my own experience and culture to understand something? As an Australian I can grasp the meaning of what life might be like in China from talking with my Chinese friend about her cultural experiences in China. My understanding has come from her experience and culture and I have used my own experience and culture as a framework to help understanding.

Based on this journey of exploration, I conclude that to understand something you don't need to rely exclusively on your own experience and culture. However, your own experience and culture is often relied on to provide a framework to aid understanding.

So, in situations where you do rely on your own experience and culture to understand something, is objective knowledge still a possibility? Based on Popper's definition of objective knowledge there are many examples of where objective knowledge exists even though understanding of this knowledge has relied on your own experience and culture. For example, in the area of natural sciences, consider this object:



From: [apfdc.aps.gov.in/BeediLeaf.jpg](http://apfdc.aps.gov.in/BeediLeaf.jpg)

If asked "True or False, is this a leaf?"<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming majority of able minded and bodied people over three years old would respond "true". Through the cultural practice of

<sup>3</sup> Here you could translate whatever the equivalent of leaf is in other verbal and non verbal languages to achieve the same conclusion. If really doing this task you would show a real leaf not a picture, otherwise you would have to ask "is this a picture of a leaf?"



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language and through experience, the concept of “a leaf” has become community owned knowledge that can be expressed as a true proposition – “this is a leaf” and according to Popper’s definition this is one example of objective knowledge. Enquirers through deductive reasoning can apply the same principles to many other well known objects in the natural world.

In mathematics people use their own experience and culture (mainly through education) to understand and know that “ $10 + 5 = 15$ ”. But this equation would have no meaning if the knowledge of the symbols “10”, “5” and “15” was not widely accepted and understood to be representative of ten, five and fifteen objects respectively. Understanding this equation also needs knowledge that the symbol “+” represents the concept of addition and the symbol “=” expresses the concept that all of one side of the equation needs to balance/equal the other side. If we subjectively interpreted these symbols to be representative of something different to these concepts, mathematics as we know it would not be possible. All these concepts are examples of objective knowledge as they have become community knowledge and are able to be expressed as true propositions. Using deductive reasoning you can apply the same argument in the knowledge area of the arts to letters, written words, literature and written music. Hence, based on Popper’s definition these symbolic representations are also examples of objective knowledge that exists despite understanding relying on your own experience and culture.

In the area of ethics you rely on experience and culture (eg: parental guidance, social norms, education etc) to develop an understanding of the legislative laws of the country you live in and to develop an understanding that these laws apply to you even if you don’t want them to. It can be argued that a country’s legislative laws are examples of objective knowledge within the context of that country as they are community owned knowledge and can be expressed as propositions. For, example, “In Australia polygamy is illegal”, so in the context of Australia this can be shown to be a true propositional statement. To develop sound understanding of this law all Australians, even those who think this law is morally wrong, must understand that the law applies to them and must all interpret the law the same way, (i.e. you cannot legally marry more than one wife at a time in Australia). Without these two premises

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Australians may not develop a clear idea of what is legal/illegal in their country and it could be argued that they don't have an understanding of this particular law.

Objective knowledge, in human sciences, can be demonstrated by asking people to drive up a busy road the wrong way. Most people would not do this because they hold the community knowledge that it is dangerous to drive on the wrong side of the road. They know this even though most of them have never experienced this to find out if it is actually dangerous. How do we know that it is dangerous to do something even though we have never experienced it? Rationalist's would argue that instincts or intuition help us understand danger but in this case driving along a road is not intrinsically dangerous in itself – personal knowledge gained through experience and cultural practices of the way traffic flows and that cars can crash helps us to reason that this activity is dangerous. This objective knowledge exists even though understanding has relied on personal experience and culture.

I have established that to understand something you do not need to exclusively rely on your own experience and culture. However, you do often refer to and rely on your own experience and culture to help develop understanding. Based on Popper's definition of objective knowledge I have shown that objective knowledge is possible even if you have relied on your own experience and culture to understand that knowledge. Calise, however, believes that knowledge gained through experience and culture has come through ones sensory organs and is therefore subjective, not objective, in nature. Based on his definition my examples of objective knowledge would not be considered valid.

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