

Impossible to have  
objective knowledge  
philosophy essay



As humans we live with the inescapable notion of our own consciousness, burdened with the endless pursuit of knowledge, we eternally accumulate a careful conglomeration of facts and experiences that shape our very being. Imprisoned within our own cultural paradigms we fear our own subjectivities, entirely aware that our language, values and beliefs impact our every choice. We do not live in a social vacuum; instead, we roam free in a stimulating and subjective society. The acquisition of knowledge, or justified true belief as here defined, is learned through our tainted sensory experiences; whether auditory, visually or kinaesthetically. However, there remains the belief that certain areas of knowledge can remain immune to our polluting paradigms, areas of knowledge that do not evoke truth in their subjectivity but tell the truth in their objectivity. We often deem subjective knowledge hot and impulsive, wrought with emotion and bias, its validity tarnished by its opinionated and unbalanced nature. Objective knowledge is logical, considered, proven and 'factual', based in the realms of reasoning; science and maths. But to what extent is mathematical and scientific knowledge actually objective? And does subjective knowledge really hold any lesser value than its' idolised counterpart or are we just afraid of own cultural paradigms?

What can be less open to interpretation and more immutable than maths? Mathematics is the science of rigorous proof and the art of drawing coherent conclusions entirely independent of interpretation; we assume this to be the epitome of objective knowledge. Maths' indubitable nature affords it enormous practical value, we are certain that  $2 + 2 = 4$  and that any circle's circumference, no matter how big, when divided by its' diameter equates to

pi. Such 'facts' rest undeniable and eternal, maths gives us non-trivial, substantial knowledge that rests true outside of experience. However, a question remains as to where maths exists? Is it, discovered or invented? The 'discovery' theorem indicates a Platonic view of maths, somewhere in a metaphysical realm, the perfect 'forms' of a circle and pi reside and mathematicians, by solving problems, are 'discovering' an entity that already exists separate from our reality. If humans weren't actively doing maths would maths exist at all? And can discoveries actually be made about mental fictions or is maths a human construction?

J. S. Mill argues that mathematics exists in the eye of the beholder and that mathematical truths are empirical generalisations based on a vast number of experiences[1]. It does appear that Maths is not a universal language; mathematicians struggle to talk to non-specialists about their work because maths like all other knowledge can be culturally variable, subject to correction and change. Mathematicians form epistemic communities; the Romans, for example, had no concept of zero, Egyptian multiplication involved repeated doubling of numbers and in West Africa only subtraction was used to express numbers (not  $2+2$  but  $6-2=4$ ). Hence, maths, as a human endeavour is susceptible to varying mental interpretation, so to what extent are we mentally selecting particular kinds of experience and deeming them to be important? We reached our modern, established perspective of maths through communication and collaboration, so it seems that although the numbers and patterns themselves are objective, the learning and advancement of maths is more inter-subjective; common ideas shared and amalgamated.

Science too, provides us with a framework for objective knowledge; science appears indisputable because it is based on observation and fact. Culturally, we deem something 'scientifically proven' to equate to the 'absolute truth'. We believe our scientific account of the universe to be true and dismiss the 'hocus pocus' of alternative medicine, creationism and the paranormal.

Science is about how the world works; there being only once correct explanation for any phenomenon. Simultaneous discovery, like the discovery of DNA initially by Watson and Crick shortly followed by Franklin and Klug demonstrate the solidity and objectivity of science. If we could rewind the history of science, developments and discoveries may have occurred differently and by different scientists but the outcomes would be very similar. Gravity would still give weight to objects, causing them to fall towards the ground and cells would still be the smallest unit of life.

However, the practice of science, as a human endeavour is founded in uncertainty, each time we learn something new with the astonishment comes the realisation that we were wrong before, David Bohm said, 'The notion of the absolute truth is shown to be in poor correspondence with the actual development of science. Scientific truths are better regarded as relationships that hold in some limited domain'. Hence, the indisputability of science is based in observation and fact but observation and fact are dependent on the theory we choose to believe. What we see depends on how we choose to look at it and as humans we cannot observe the world purely and unhindered. Instead we see and structure things around our own cultural paradigms. Our science is based on a Westernised view that progress and objectivity are best reached through classification and

explanation but does this render it useless? Of course not, science is there to be used but it is not there to tell us how things are. Science is not powerful because it is true: it is true because it is powerful[2].

But is truth synonymous with objectivity? Or can we harness our subjective and emotional human natures to further enhance our knowledge? Montaigne claimed, 'to understand via the heart is not to understand' and through our quest to objectify knowledge we ignore our most basic emotional instincts. A scientific definition of emotion is the 'modification of neural activity that animates and focuses mental activity' but is this not missing the vital essence of what it is to feel an emotion? This description of emotion is like describing art as a collection of blobs on canvas or defining poetry as words in short lines. Some knowledge demands subjectivity and complexity, notions of good and beauty, for example. In many ways 'formal' knowledge of maths, philosophy and geography are a means to satisfy the highest and noblest human impulse and self-actualisation; the arts. Often human truths cannot be expressed using the language of rationality; it seems the artist attempt to address these truths while embracing their own creative process. Indeed art is a personal creation and contains the opinions of the artist but with science the feelings of the scientist are neglected from the final understanding of the process. Does this make science better than the arts? It would if science and the arts were investigating the same truths; science is obsessed with knowledge of the universe whereas art lends itself to knowledge of humanity.

Iris Murdoch famously in *The Sovereignty of the Good* suggests that

appreciation of the arts allows us to transcend the problems of rationality  
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and empiricism that plague the human condition. Murdoch believes there to be some sort of objective 'good' but sees that the means of achieving this end is to open our consciousness towards art thus directing our being towards 'unselfishness, objectivity and realism'. The very nature of art as an ephemeral entity; forever transforming and evolving, transports us away from the comfort of our own subjectivities and plunges us into alternative human truths. No one is suggesting the lines and colours reveal truths in themselves; as Margaret Atwood said, 'context is all'.

To read WH Auden's Sonnets entitled, 'In Time of War', is not to gain 'facts' or objective truths about the Japanese occupation of China in 1938 but instead to bask in the literature, meaning and beauty of poetry. Auden's words speak a deep and vitally human truth so by trying to reduce this art to a series of concrete 'facts' are we not diminishing it? Of course the sky didn't 'throb like a feverish forehead' and obviously the Japanese soldiers were not 'bound like the heiress in her mother's womb'. It is more the penetrating insights, the deep sense of social awareness and contextual relevance that afford poetry and the arts as a whole the ability to bestow knowledge about humanity during the most turbulent and controversial eras. If anything, art is a continuous cultural narrative, evolving and translating the daily events that form our history.

The search for certainty, objectivity and absolute truth lends itself to the study of history, for what could be more certain than that which has already happened? As G. R Elton suggests, 'the study of history is concerned with a subject matter more objective and independent than that of the natural sciences', and we often acknowledge the apparent immutability and un-

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changeability of the past. But as Napoleon argued, ' what is history but a fable agreed upon?' From the age of eleven, during history classes we are indoctrinated into the significance of bias and the vigilance required to exercise caution around historical opinion. It is almost impossible to expect any human historian to escape their own paradigms and write free from influence. We are forever imposing our own values and moralities onto the past; my own essay on the reputation of Queen Marie-Antoinette during the French Revolution was largely angled around my own prejudices against misogyny and patriarchy. Perhaps more than anything, history is a social construct, facts about the past that are interpreted in the present. However, the selective and human nature of history does not deem it ' twisted' or ' useless' or ' fabricated', by removing the judgemental and interpretational aspects of history we are left with fragmented and scattered etchings of the past. The historian herself is aware of her bias and thus seeks a convergence of evidence in a hope that further analysis and reasoning will transform such etchings into an original, insightful and beautiful picture.