

Unpacking the ToK PE Topics

2021-2022

1. Can there be **knowledge** that is **independent** of **culture**? Discuss with reference to mathematics and one other area of knowledge.

- **Can there be** - Is it possible. This question IS NOT asking TWE - it is binary
- **Knowledge** - There are many ways that this could be defined (propositional, procedural etc), but a definition is essential to this topic. Be sure not to confuse with belief.
- **Independent** - Not contingent on anything else for its existence, not subject to or dependent on the specified thing.
- **Culture** - Culture is the patterns of learned and shared behavior and beliefs of a particular social, ethnic, or age group. It can also be described as the complex whole of collective human beliefs with a structured stage of civilization that can be specific to a nation or time period. Humans in turn use culture to adapt and transform the world they live in. (lumen learning - accessed on 1.11.22 at <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/culturalanthropology/chapter/what-is-culture/>)

Approaches

- Math is clearly chosen because it seems independent of culture. A significant part of your essay will be an assessment of whether or not that is true
- One approach might be to argue that math is independent and show this through comparison to another AoK (art would work particularly well). This works well if you argue that math is discovered, rather than invented. A possible counter would be that it is our beliefs about math, not math itself, that is bound by culture
- Another approach would be to argue that nothing we do is independent of culture and then demonstrate how this is true of math and another AoK. This approach would require examples of how math is approached differently in different cultural contexts.

2. To what extent do you agree with the claim that “there’s a **world of difference** between **truth** and **facts**” (Maya Angelou)? Answer with reference to two areas of knowledge.

- **World of difference** - This is stated colloquially. In your essay clarify what you believe it to mean. This is a case where your clarification is key, because there is no one set definition for what this means. Try restating the phrase in other words to define it.
- **Truth** - Again, is this intended colloquially or literally? In a colloquial sense truth is a larger understanding - for example the truth of slavery v. the facts of slavery’s existence. In a philosophical sense truth can be understood in terms of the three truth tests - correspondence, coherence and pragmatics. A clear definition early on should guide the rest of the essay
- **Facts** - Data points that often exist outside of a larger context

Approaches

- This quote seems very similar to Picasso's claim that "art is the lie that tells the truth." Many of you, in the last essay, used this approach when arguing that art often reveals more than science when it comes to tragic events. This would be a good approach here. This essay could be used to explore your ideas regarding this idea in greater depth
- Similarly, the apocryphal quote attributed to Stalin that "a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic" is relevant here. Think about Mr. Alexandre's paper clip lecture when he discusses the Holocaust.
- Connected to both of the above, another approach would be to examine the role of emotion in understanding. Emotion is not required to understand facts, but is it essential to understand the truth
- Alternately, you could use the topic to explore the proliferation of mis-/dis information, by arguing that people form their own truths that are independent of facts and that this is very dangerous. Think about climate change and COVID in NatSci and denial that Biden won the election in the HumSci. This could be a very fruitful approach.

4. **How** do historians and human scientists **give knowledge meaning** through the **telling of stories**? Discuss with reference to history and the human sciences.

- **“How”** - What methods are used, provide exam
- **“give knowledge meaning”** - This implies that knowledge is assigned meaning by its producers, rather than being intrinsically meaningful. The word meaning should be given attention. What does it mean for something to have meaning? This might imply significance, interest, context or schema. What is the difference between trivia and meaningful knowledge?
- **“telling of stories”** - A story is generally assumed to have a narrative, so this question becomes effectively - how do historians and human scientists use narrative to create meaning? The key here is that narrative takes otherwise disparate facts and binds them together in the form of a story. A story often provides the audience with a schema for understanding specific bits of factual information. The word telling has meaning here also. Storytelling involves more than just words.

Approaches

- One approach to history and human sciences is to examine how these AoKs have been historically used to confirm pre-existing biases or fulfill political agendas. For history the “Lost Cause” could be examined and in the human sciences how “science” has been used to justify racism and prejudice (phrenology, social Darwinism, eugenics etc). This would be a critical approach to the topic
- Another approach would be to examine a study in history and the human sciences and examine the role narrative plays in the effectiveness of the study - think about the Holocaust and the Stanford prison experiment.
- One way to think of this from another perspective is to ask the question of whether the story can get in the way of the knowledge that is being transmitted. Does the narrative ever eclipse the facts? Think about the post-modernist critique of meta-narratives.
- It might be useful to look up narrative theory when preparing to write this essay

**How can we distinguish between good and bad interpretations?
Discuss with reference to the arts and one other area of knowledge.**

- “How can we distinguish” - This is essentially asking for the criteria for judging good and bad interpretations. By what standard is an interpretation either good or bad? The criteria should be incorporated into the introduction and thesis
- “good and bad interpretations” - An interpretation is an attempt to explain or make meaning from something. Facts without interpretation are meaningless. Interpretation is separate from the fact itself. This wording implies that there are good and bad interpretations in both AoKs (more on this in approaches). The word interpretation here does NOT mean “interpret” as in translating a foreign language.

Approaches

- Interpretation of art often involves the application of aesthetic theories to a work of art. Review what we discussed in class about aesthetic theories.
- One way to approach this topic is to compare two disciplines that are clearly different. Art was required intentionally because we commonly believe that all or most interpretations of art are good, because art is expected to be subjective. Two people can look at the same painting and come up with very different interpretations. How different would this be from the natural sciences where a scientist “interprets” the data from an experiment?
- To what extent is “good” interpretation of art constrained by the intent of the artist? Do similar constraints exist in other AoKs?
- Does art differ from other AoKs in this regard because all other AoKs must deal with “truth” in a way that the artist does not?

If we **conclude** that there is **some knowledge we should not pursue on ethical grounds**, how can we **determine the boundaries of acceptable investigation** within an area of knowledge? Discuss with reference to two areas of knowledge.

- **“conclude”** - To make a final determination. Note that this is a given in this PT. The essay must be written with this in mind - you cannot argue that we should not conclude that some knowledge should not be pursued on ethical grounds
- **“some knowledge we should not pursue on ethical grounds”** - Provide examples of knowledge that should not be pursued for this reason. Avoid generalities.
- **“determine the boundaries of acceptable investigation”** Clear criteria for what places knowledge in this proscribed category is essential here for each of the areas of knowledge you choose. These criteria should be indicated early on in the essay - the introduction would be preferable. Again, avoid generalities.

Approaches

- Remember, this PT is written so that you **must assume** some knowledge should not be pursued.
- This topic does not seem to be suggesting that some methods (means) should not be used, but rather some knowledge (ends) should not be sought. This is an important distinction to keep in mind.
- The natural sciences (including medicine) seem like a good fit here. Think about issues like human cloning and the development of weapons of mass destruction. There are currently controversies in computer science regarding the use of AI research for military and policing purposes. An entire section of the essay could probably be built around the idea of AI
- The second AoK will probably be more challenging. Art and the human sciences seem likely to be the most promising.
- Another approach to this PT would be to establish general principles of lines that no researcher should cross and then explore where those boundaries would be in two areas of knowledge. This would have the essay start with a theoretical prohibition (from Kant or principles ethics) and then explore what this prohibition would look like in two AoKs