

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.

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.