

“To understand something you need to rely on your own experience and culture.

Does this mean that it is impossible to have objective knowledge?”

The question implies that humankind can only have subjective experience and since we have to rely on our experiences to understand something, it is impossible for us to gain objective knowledge - a knowledge which is often viewed as more superior than subjective interpretations. Initially, this view seems plausible as every individual has their own experiences and their points of views are influenced by specific cultures. In this sense it is impossible to have an objective knowledge that every individual agrees on. Nonetheless, this is too simplistic as we have other sources of knowledge and other ways of overcoming the cultural relativity of our knowledge. Through the adoption of mathematical symbols and further application of scientific methods, there have been attempts to make knowledge more objective and independent of cultural values and perceptions. Moreover, subjective knowledge may not always be inferior to objective knowledge. In areas such as art for example, subjective knowledge is perhaps better in informing the concepts and nature of emotion that objective interpretations cannot tell us. Although the question seems to argue that objective knowledge is an unreachable target, it is possible to say that in some areas of knowledge we have been able to move closer to it.

One area which humankind has moved closer to achieving objective knowledge is mathematics. The language of math has been reduced to symbols that are universally recognised and understood. As a result of this language reduction, cultural interferences are eliminated allowing a more objective form of knowledge to be acquired. Evidence of this is found in the universal acceptance of Pythagorean Theorem of right angled triangles.

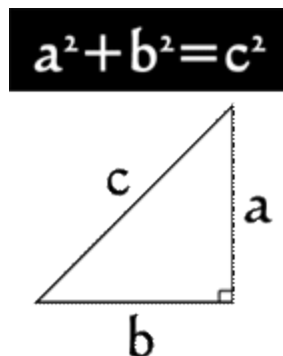


Figure 1: Pythagorean Theorem

On a flat plane this theorem is uninhibited by cultural biases in language and acknowledged as an absolute truth. Contrary to the question, this evidence seems to indicate that objective knowledge is possible.

On the other hand, math requires that certain axioms are accepted before an objective truth can be revealed. $5 + 5 = 10$ given that the axiom of a certain base is used. One of the limitations of math is therefore that axioms are only fundamental assumptions which although seem reasonable, may depend

on culture and life experiences. We are expected to simply accept them in order to prove something else. If the axiom that a mathematical problem follows is incorrect, the answer which is received may also be untrue hence it is fair to say that math is not as objective as we would like to believe.

Nevertheless, math allows cultural biases to be removed to reach a purer and more objective kind of knowledge. As a result of our mathematical knowledge of the universe, we are able to travel into space and land on the moon with some degree of accuracy. Therefore, it appears that math enables us to get closer to a more objective form of knowledge.

Another way which humankind seeks to overcome subjectivity is by using the scientific method to standardise testing methods. The scientific method demands observation and then the formation of a hypothesis before testing and coming to a conclusion. Objectivity is achieved by ensuring the test is 'fair' or devoid of bias and subjectivity. The results indicate whether a new hypothesis is needed or if the current hypothesis requires revision. Additionally, the experiment should be replicated to assure the certainty of the results. The scientific method has brought a number of benefits to the world as through observation and testing we are able to understand our surroundings more accurately. Newton formulated the laws of gravity using this method and his work allowed humankind to understand the orbits of planets as well as indicate the existence of planets such as Uranus and Neptune before their discovery. The scientific method gives us the basis of a fair test and allows data from different sources to be compared and verified.

On the other hand, science also has its weaknesses. I take Biology at school and once carried out an experiment investigating the characteristics of animal cells. I decided to use an electron microscope as it gives a higher resolution allowing magnification of up to x500,000 in comparison to the light microscope which only allows magnification of x600. I came to find out later that while the electron microscope enabled closer observations of the cell's structure, unlike the light microscope, living materials cannot survive in the vacuum inside electron microscopes hence movements such as blood flow could not be studied. This constraint limited the depth of my experiment by reducing the accuracy of my results and conclusion. While it can be argued that both microscopes could have been used in this experiment, the limitation of science technology nonetheless still suggests that science cannot completely provide objective knowledge.

Although it may be impossible to prove that we have objective knowledge, science has enabled us to make predictions which are often correct. For example, we are able to calculate the position of planets with enough accuracy to predict that the next solar eclipse will last for 398 seconds and take place on 22 July 2009 at 00:51:16. Even if we cannot be certain of some of the conclusions produced, the scientific method is our best attempt at removing subjectivity from our knowledge.

It is possible that we are able to acquire knowledge of the world in other ways besides experience and culture. Some forms of knowledge are instinctive for instance we know how to breathe from the moment of birth. This knowledge is neither connected to experience nor culture. However, it can be argued that

knowing how to breathe is not actually knowledge but an action performed without reference to our consciousness. In response to this, I agree that breathing is an action however I also believe that although breathing cannot be classified as a conventional knowledge such as 'the smallest planet in the solar system is Mercury', it is still considered a knowledge as humans do know how to breathe.

I play volleyball for my school and can serve confidently. This is another example of something I can do which is not necessarily considered a form of conventional knowledge. Though some may argue that serving is a skill which is learnt through experiences of matches and developed with help from a coach, I was able to serve on my own even before the season and trainings started while some of my teammates who regularly attended trainings still could not serve by the end of the season. These two examples counter the implications of the question as it suggests we don't always have to rely on culture and experience to understand something.

Furthermore, while the question implies that objective knowledge is superior to subjective interpretations this is not always the case. In some areas of knowledge subjectivity may be more useful than objectivity. Objective knowledge presents only part of a larger picture. Art may be able to convey more messages concerning the nature of society than any census could. Pop art which emerged in mid 1950s is a visual arts movement that incorporates popular images and icons to comment on contemporary society. Pop artist Andy Warhol created the famous 'Soup Cans' which was a replication of 32 identical cans with different soup names.



Figure 2: Soup Cans, 1962

Each picture is positioned in regular rows to mimic the layout of shop shelves. At the time, Campbell's soup cans were considered to be the backdrop of the lives of every American as it was so popular amongst the people. Warhol claimed that he wanted observers to respond directly to his work rather than his skills and personality. Objective knowledge such as the size, colour or even the price of this art work

will not gain the subjective responses the artist wants. Essentially, 'Soup Cans' imitates the idealistic even spread of power amongst American citizens and reflects the uncontrollable modern consumerist culture that society has adopted. This is what Warhol wanted observers to feel and understand through his work. Though art is subjective, it is perhaps a more truthful way of understanding human nature and the way humankind interacts with one another. Thus the messages communicated through art are possibly stronger and more effective than objective knowledge.

As well as this, my personal experience of the Tsunami which struck southern Thailand in 2004 also illustrates the superiority of a subjective experience over an objective view. A total of 275,950 people were killed in South East Asia and of those, 5,393 were killed in Thailand. In the aftermath, I witnessed the agony of close friends that had lost family members. The death toll tells only of the deaths and injuries of anonymous humans however personal experience hits us much harder as we feel the suffering pain and hope attached to tragedies such as this. In this sense, subjective experience seems to be superior as it enables humankind to connect to reality better than objective knowledge does.

Ultimately, although knowledge in the areas of math and science is able to move closer to objectivity, the knowledge that we have will always be tainted with subjectivity despite our attempts to rectify the issue. In addition, contrary to the implications of the question, it seems there are times when the knowledge we have is not subjective at all as knowledge such as breathing is independent of both culture and experience. Moreover, objective knowledge is not always more superior than subjective knowledge; in areas such as the subjective art we are able to learn and understand humanity better than in the so called objective science.

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