

# **TOK Essay**

**Title 2: “Knowledge gained through direct experience is powerful but problematic.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?**

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Knowledge is a critically essential part of the world and environment around us. In our lifetime, we acquire knowledge through many different/several mediums. One of the most effective ways of gaining knowledge is through our direct experience & interactions with situations and people. This can be further substantiated through Albert Einstein's quote, "Information is not knowledge. The only source of knowledge is experience. You need experience to gain wisdom. To explore further the relationship between knowledge and direct experience, it is important to break these words down in order to understand their context: Knowledge and direct experience. Knowledge can be said to be all or any information/data which enhances our understanding and experience of any subject matter. While direct experience can be said to be the primary/fundamental means of gaining knowledge or personal experience. This powerful source of knowledge acquisition can lead to many repercussions in what we believe and how we react to certain situations. Therefore in this essay, I will explore instances of knowledge acquisition in the fields of Arts and human sciences to discuss the prescribed title and also probe the question: To what extent is empirical knowledge substantial enough to be relied upon?

Art is an area of knowledge that is hard to define compared to others. It is about conveying emotion and imagination through various different forms. Usually, when we are intuitively drawn towards art, we may feel what art is, but we are not confident enough to answer the question: what is art?. Here emotions play a vital role in understanding it. When we connect our emotion with direct knowledge gained through the perception of any artwork, the knowledge we gain is powerful. This is because we tend to understand any artform easily when we get emotionally connected to it. Research by the University of Vienna shows that emotional responses usually play an essential part in one's experience of the artwork and the creation of these results has been the purpose of the artistic expression. Moreover, it shows that the neurological underpinnings of what we end up perceiving from the AOK of art, differs significantly from those used in standard object recognition<sup>1</sup>. This means that when we are introduced to a piece of artwork, our emotions kick in and start creating aesthetic evaluations of our perspectives towards that piece of work. Due to the strong emotional connection in what we see, we end up making judgments and forming an emotional response towards the work of art. For example, *Starry night* is one of the famous paintings of Vincent Van Gogh<sup>2</sup>. It is a very subtle piece of art that shows a village of Saint-Remy under the sun. It is a simple painting open to analyse in any way but when we analyse, we see the lines and the colour used and some people would not like the design and some would. This shows that we may not realize this direct connection that our emotions play when we perceive any piece of artwork makes the knowledge that we gain much more powerful. Therefore, our emotions towards the art piece help us to strongly believe in the knowledge that we gain through any direct experiences with the artform.

However, it is also possible that art can trigger an emotional reaction. Our emotions which are generated through our experience are not always positive and when we tend to see some art form that somehow connects to the same context, we may experience which may drive us to come to conclusions/judgments easily and we impulsively avoid acknowledging the real reason inspiration behind the creation of that particular artwork. This may lead us to form biased conclusions about certain works of art. This means that, when direct knowledge is coupled with emotions, we may end up with biased, irrational conclusions. Keeping this fact in mind, two renowned scientists- Prof. Dr. Dacher Keltner and Alan Cowen from the University of California, Berkeley, conducted research on the emotions generated by artworks through time and across cultures. They asked 1,300 participants to describe their feelings towards 1,500 paintings

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<sup>1</sup> <https://aesthetics.univie.ac.at/research/art-emotion/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.vangoghgallery.com/painting/starry-night.html>

shown during the period of research and the results revealed 25 different emotional responses expressed by the participants<sup>3</sup>. This data was then utilized to create an interactive map that grouped artworks with the specific emotions generated. This experiment was conducted to understand the relationship that our emotions have on the way we perceive any artwork. There were so many different feelings and emotions that different people experienced via the same piece of art which points towards the subjective nature of artworks. We end up making biased and irrational conclusions about different art pieces because instead of using our ability to reason, we are influenced by our emotions. Therefore, we can say that our encounter with any work of art is highly influenced by our emotions and this could lead us to ignore the actual reason/ inspiration behind it.

We may further take this discussion in the area of human sciences which aims to explain human behaviour which comprises various disciplines such as psychology, economics, political science, etc. On a daily basis, we use different ways of knowing to comprehend the world around us, but most people will agree to the fact that perception is an important source of knowledge and that is what makes us humans quite dependent on our senses. We humans believe in what we see, read, eat, listen or touch. In the knowledge that we gain through various sources, our senses play an important role to shape the way we understand and arrive at conclusions. This instils confidence in us to not question the reliability of the knowledge that we gain through our senses. We are known to believe more in our instincts than in any reasoning. In many instances, our instincts are the best indicators to follow as they come from within. If we look closely we realize that our senses play a key role in decision making across every aspect of our lives and this affects our behaviour in certain situations! This is an important part of a study in psychology and other areas of human sciences. The best example is kids learning their mother tongue especially kids aged between 2-4. It is not taught in schools nor is any special education given. It is purely through their listening that they acquire language skills. Babies can listen to 150 different sounds of which languages are learned. This is called learning by phonemes. It demonstrates how babies without prior knowledge are able to learn the language relying on their sense of listening.

On the other hand, our sense perception can be altered by physical factors such as stress or extreme temperature and the environment in general. This shows the possibilities of manipulation in our gaining of knowledge through sense perception. Therefore, the knowledge connected with sense perception can be manipulated. When we are collecting information, our senses direct all input to the brain for analysis and interpretation of the information received through various senses. Manipulating the thought leads to manipulating the knowledge gained through the senses. This kind of manipulation is shown in various movies, one of which is its inception. This movie shows how a mind thief has the ability to manipulate knowledge at the subconscious level of the human brain. Another relevant example is research undertaken by a Ph.D. student at the University of Sussex, it talks about how sense manipulation of smell and sound can change the way we interpret our own body<sup>4</sup>. During the experiment, participants were asked to adjust the size of a 3D avatar according to their perception of self. A lemon scent resulted in participants feeling lighter; and a vanilla scent, heavier. The result was that the scent of lemon could improve how people feel about their bodies. This shows how even senses can be manipulated and how it affects the knowledge produced through them.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://experiments.withgoogle.com/art-emotions-map>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.inverse.com/mind-body/sense-of-smell-body-image-study>

To conclude, all human beings have a very unique set of experiences that they collect over their lifetime and the knowledge or lessons that they learn from them are not easily forgotten. This is what makes them so powerful. As one explores the many different ways how knowledge gained through empirical means is powerful, it also helps come to the point where one realizes that this powerful form of knowledge can come with its own set of challenges. However, with the sufficient amount of evidence that we saw above, it becomes evident that knowledge gained through direct experiences forms an essential part of the way that we look at different situations and people. In comparison to the different types of knowledge, empirical knowledge uses a more practical approach. The main problem that arises though is the lack of evidence to support the conclusions that we make under this type of knowledge acquisition. Therefore, it can be said that one cannot always rely on direct experiences when it comes to decision-making. Gaining knowledge through our real-life experiences is essential but should be limited.

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