

Theory of Knowledge Essay

Q10: "Context is all" (Margaret Atwood). Does this mean there is no such thing as truth?

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"Context is all" (Margaret Atwood). Does this mean there is no such thing as truth?

'What is truth?' I was first challenged by this question in my TOK class. Although at first I was really confident with the meaning of the term 'truth', I ended up being confused. I believe we frequently take things for granted. These are ironically things which at first sound simple and essential to us, such as our identity (who am I?). We tend to approach them pragmatically. In the same manner we take the meaning of 'truth' for granted. If, however, we think about it we will end up realizing how complex it actually is. This leads us to our quest for the meaning of 'truth'; an endless spiral mind path in which the deeper we reflect on it, the more knowledge we obtain, but the less explicit the clause appears to be.

This, however, does not mean there is no such thing as truth. In my opinion truth exists. But not as one element but as many which are mostly subordinated by the 'thinkers' context. Everything we think, know and believe is a mere creation of our mind, which is build up by many factors such as our memories, emotions, culture, reason, our perception and our language. As these form our 'context' and they differ from person to person, and as context is a mean to 'build truth', one can argue that context is essential but does not eliminate truth. In this essay I will analyze whether truth is universal or depends fully on the context.

A highly debated topic of whether truth is universal or depends on context is the 1948 UN Universal Declaration Human Rights (UDHR). Can our rights as human beings be universal although our contexts are so different? Who should be entitled to define them? Although the UN General Assembly was integrated by delegates from most countries, in my opinion the UDHR mirrors first and foremost Western mindsets and values. When I first reflected about this knowledge issue, I thought they were universal; or at least they should be. Certainly, I'm influenced by my personal context. Throughout my life I have been told by authority figures such as my parents that human rights (HR) are true and universal and that I, my family and friends will benefit from their implementation anywhere in the world. I am also influenced by reason, which at first does not let me see the logic of someone who deliberately disagrees with these rights. Therefore I've grown up valuing these rights because my reason, my emotions and authority dictate that these are 'true' and thus create a 'modern paradigm'. Although in practice HR are not fully practiced in Western societies, they are accepted as an ideal of ultimate truth. However, what if they clash with legal, religious and/or cultural contexts in non-Western societies? Are these contexts then illegitimate? Are then HR truly universal or do they depend on the context in which they are implemented? Many Islamic countries have criticized the universality of HR arguing that they do not take into account non-Western contexts, highlighting the religious aspect.¹ A UN representative of the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, alleged that the UDHR is "a Western secular concept of Judeo-Christian origin, incompatible with the sacred Islamic *shari'a*."² Therefore, it cannot be implemented in Islamic countries without breaking Islamic law. Not only Iran, but other Islamic countries have striven to change either the UDHR or the use of the word 'universal'.³

¹ Littman, David. "Universal Human Rights and Human Rights in Islam". *Midstream*, February/March 1999. <http://mypage.bluewin.ch/ameland/Islam.html> (17/11/07)

² *Ibid*, (17/11/07).

³ *Ibid*, (17/11/07).

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In other areas of knowledge such as the social sciences, specifically in anthropology, context is an important factor which constantly influences 'truth'. My mother is an anthropologist and she often tells me how difficult this can be. She argues that the anthropologist's aim is not to find some abstract 'truth', but to interpret human behavior in its own cultural context in order to understand it. Research findings are permeated by the researcher's worldviews and those belonging to the subjects under study. Let us take a young EZLN member in the Lacandon Jungle who sustains that he would rather die than accept that his ethnic group is not treated with the respect it deserves. Can we understand what he is feeling if we have not felt it before? This is called 'knowing by acquaintance' and is a factor which might challenge the pursuit of knowledge in anthropological research. When my mother uses a translator to interview indigenous people who do not speak Spanish, the message might be lost in translation because sometimes it is impossible to translate certain words or phrases that do not have an equivalent in the target language and its worldview. For example, the Spanish phrases 'te quiero' and 'te amo' are both translated into English as 'I love you'⁴. However, 'te quiero' does not mean 'I love you' but expresses a different feeling which cannot easily be put into English words. These are central problems in any cross-cultural anthropological research which depends on the researcher's ability to understand and interpret the 'other's' expressions within their own cultural worldview and to reconstruct their underlying truth without imposing the researcher's rationale and truth on them.

In the abstract world of art both context and truth seem to conflict. Art seems to concur with Atwood's statement that 'context is all'. This is because art appears to be marked by a subjective nature and thus the knowledge acquired from it is subjected to the context of the observer. The subjective nature of art surfaced when many students in my TOK class found it difficult to understand what kind of knowledge could be acquired from art, probably because their idea of 'knowledge' was too concrete and narrow. This conflicts with the abstract nature of art and thus the abstract and personal knowledge which is gained from it. In the case of the visual arts, this message is abstract since art does not use symbols or active energy as a language, but a tangible and passive, yet expressive array of colors, figures, shapes and tones which by themselves, framed and hung on a wall, do not represent anything at all. The message is created by the interaction of the piece of art and the viewer who is influenced by all sorts of ways of knowledge – especially emotions- which are determined by the viewer's personal context. These have been increased and altered throughout the viewer's life by each single emotion felt, conversation spoken, impact digested, etc. creating a mixture of every bizarre thing possible. This fusion comes to life every time the senses are used. When you open your eyes what you see will be related to this mixture or personal context creating a personal response. This is exactly what happens when you look at a piece of art. The message acquired will not necessarily coincide with the message the artist had in mind when drawing the piece, but a message created by the personal context's interpretation. This is what makes it unique. Every individual will then craft his/her own truth according to his/her personal context (Beautiful, isn't it?). Therefore, truth exists in art, but not as a single truth. Each piece of art will inspire as many expressions of truth as different viewers create when watching it.

⁴ Word Reference: Spanish English Dictionary: <http://www.wordreference.com/es/en/translation.asp?spen=quiero> (8/12/07)

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A good example is Picassos' "Guernica" which created different interpretations and therefore expressions of truth in different historical contexts. I showed the painting to some of my friends and asked them what message they received from it. Almost all of them found the piece absolutely ugly. After doing further research I realized that this is a common way of seeing this mural today. Many present day viewers do not feel any emotion since their experience does not relate to the historical context of the painting. Their interpretation contrasts sharply with the one it inspired when it was painted in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, right after the bombing of the Basque village of Guernica by the German Luftwaffe. 'Guernica managed to create a major impact'⁵. Clearly, Picasso intended to send out a strong message influenced by his emotions, as well as his personal and the general historical context. Josep Lluís Sert remembers the reaction of the public when the piece was first exposed: "The people marched in front of the piece in silence, as if they noticed that [...] the piece was a premonition of the consequences of the world war, [...] a sea of pain and death"⁶. The viewers interpreted the painting according to their personal and historical context, i.e. their emotions about the sufferings of the Spanish Civil War. This reaction illustrates the connections between the historical context and the message that leads to a specific truth, a truth that differs sharply from that obtained from my classmates in the XXI century.

In quite different contexts, human rights, social sciences and the arts, context has proven to be an influential factor in the pursuit of knowledge. It is evident that at least in these areas context influences but does not eliminate 'truth' as a general concept. I would argue that truth is neither totally universal, nor is it fully determined by the context. Furthermore, context highlights truth and makes it admirable and interesting to such an extent that hundreds of IB students are at this instant writing about it. In the case of my essay, context can also be interpreted as a personal and unique account of an individual's ways of knowing. It works like a poison: a portion of reason, a glass of emotion, some past experiences, a handful of language and a spoonful of culture. Now stir it, drink it and let it influence your thinking through life.

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⁵ "Pablo Ruiz Picasso", <http://tierra.free-people.net/artes/pintura-pablo-picasso.php>

⁶ "El Guernica - Pablo Ruiz Picasso. La historia del cuadro mas famoso del siglo XX", <http://blog.innerpendejo.net/2006/10/el-guernica-pablo-ruiz-picasso-la.html> (19/11/07)