

May 08

5. "...we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology." (Noam Chomsky). To what extent would you agree?
William Stevenson, Allen D Nease High School

Topic #5 : "...we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology." (Noam Chomsky). To what extent would you agree?

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The pursuit of truth pertaining to human life and personality has inspired countless generations to seek enlightenment about the human condition in a variety of ways. In recent years, the scientific approach of the human sciences has become the preeminent method in attaining truth about the nature of mankind. The increased prominence of the human sciences can be attributed to its focus on objectivity, linear nature, and operational definitions. However, some would argue that this very focus on objectivity limits the human science's ability to infer truth about predominantly subjective matters such as human personality and life. Noam Chomsky, a prevalent psychologist and linguist, once spoke on the limitations of the human sciences when he said, "...we will learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology." Chomsky is suggesting that art, as implied by the study of a novel, provides superior means of gaining understanding about the nature of human existence than the strictly scientific aspects of the human sciences, as implied by the study of scientific psychology. While the objective approach of the human sciences provides a degree of insight in many cases, the subjective course taken by the arts often provides a superior explanation of human life and personality.

The origin of the conflict between objective and subjective studies lies primarily in the methods' abilities to arrive at truth. Truth, as outlined by Plato, is singular, absolute, and resistant to time. For example, the concept that the earth rotates completely once every 24 hours can be regarded as a universal truth. Thus, according to Plato, what is true for one is true for all (Nelson 1-6). As a result, the pursuit of truth has become a predominantly objective study; however, proponents of subjectivity would argue that an absolute, singular, and objective truth is not attainable in every circumstance. For instance, if I perform a study on the types of stimuli that prompt anger in a sample of 50 people, I would find that the stimulus that prompts anger in

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the first subject could cause sadness in the second, and pride in the third, thus I would be unable to arrive at an objective truth pertaining to the sources of anger for different individuals.

The human sciences have provided several explanations for the origins of behavior and personality with varying levels of subjectivity. For example, in Freudian psychology, all attention is focused on unconscious conflict between three personal entities: the id, ego, and superego. This conflict is neither observable nor quantifiable, thus the method is distinctly subjective. Yet, Freud's theory easily explains and alters some of the most complex psychological disorders. As time passed and scientific objectivity became more prevalent, a new branch of psychology known as the behavioral branch developed. This perspective focused solely on observable behavior in an attempt to remain scientific. While this theory provides valid explanations and is able to alter simple behaviors, its focus on objective study severely hinders its ability to explain or change the more complex behaviors (Wagner1-3). Herein lies the dilemma; I am presented with two well-known and accepted approaches, one predominantly subjective the other distinctly scientific. Which one provides a superior explanation and will lead me to truth? To some extent, the answer is neither, for neither perspective poses a theory that adequately encompasses the whole of human life and personality. Does this mean the objective portions of the human sciences cannot lead to truth in some cases? Of course not, but they simply cannot be considered the sole road to truth.

There are also problems and issues of knowledge that arise with the scientific obsession of the human sciences. For example, if I am studying the Bystander Effect in a closed environment by subjecting four people to a scene of domestic violence and observing their reactions, the method lacks ecological validity, for at the very foundations of understanding, studying the reactions of four people in a controlled environment does not provide a valid

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explanation for the behavior of a population in nature (Bystander 1). Arguably, as soon as environmental conditions are altered, knowledge cannot be ascertained about the original environment. Conversely, those in favor of the scientific method would argue that without controlling variables we would be unable to draw any conclusions because of our limited understanding of the natural world.

Further issues about scientific methodology arise from its reliance on operational definitions and observation. If I was performing a study on how distressed babies become when they are separated from their parents, I would be required to define levels of distress on a scale in an attempt to prevent subjectivity. However, now the study has been introduced to the scientist's perception, which is a strongly confounding variable. Some philosophers, like Descartes, would argue that this reliance on observation prevents the human sciences from producing an objective truth, as the senses themselves cannot be trusted to separate reality from fiction (Kemmerling 1). Still further, as I would be unable to run a controlled or ethical experiment on babies distress levels when they are separated from their parents I would have to take psychologists conclusions on authority; however, in doing so I limit my certainty in the experimenter's results, for I cannot be certain that their method was precise and accurate. The human sciences reliance on mathematics and inferential statistics also yields marked problems, because many argue that mathematics in itself is a construct that attempts to explain reality and thus it cannot be employed as a substitute for reality.

By contrast, art is anything that is created to intentionally evoke some type of emotional response and provide insight into artist's reality. As such, art, unlike the sciences, embraces subjectivity. Those in favor of an objective pursuit of truth would argue that this limits art's ability to yield an absolute and objective truth; however, the increase in subjectivity allows

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knowers to gain a broader and deeper understanding of human life and personality in many cases.

The subjective nature of art is evident in the great literature works of our century. For example, consider The Metamorphosis, by Franz Kafka, a prominent Austrian author. In the opening scene of this piece, the audience becomes privy to the horrendous external transformation of Gregor, the novel's compelling protagonist. As the novel progresses, the audience follows Gregor's internal struggle as he fights feelings of isolation and insignificance, which culminate in his stagnation and ultimate death. By observing Gregor's reaction to his plight, the audience can gain a great deal of perspective about both the resilience and equally the frailty of the human psyche (Kafka 1-55). However, this interaction with the text can prove to be problematic in the pursuit of truth because it allows for bias and multiple interpretations, which limits its ability to arrive at an objective truth about the nature of human life and personality. Other problems stem from the novel's reliance on language, as words bear different connotations for different people and cultures, further muddling the veiled truth of the work. On the other hand, the potentially diverse interpretations of such a novel gives a knower an appreciation of the uniqueness of a situation and the individuality of the subject that scientific psychology tends to neglect. For instance, while it is clear to the audience, who is viewing the piece subjectively, that Gregor's internal strife is due to his seclusion and shame, if an objective behavioral psychologist reviewed Gregor's case she would first ignore all Gregor's cognitive function and then suggest that his altered behavior and personality were due solely to his associations between his actions and their consequences. The contemplation of such an elementary explanation of a complex topic is troublesome, at best.

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The visual arts also serve to enlighten knowers about the nature of human existence and personality. For example, during the Hellenistic period of Greece, a sculpture was created of an old beggar woman. She is hunched over a heavy load wearing rags. She is introspective and her brow is furrowed, which clearly indicates her suffering. From this single image, I can conclude with limited certainty that this woman was a peasant who had led a long arduous life that was anything but pleasant, yet her drive to continue that miserable life compels her to return to the market to sell her wares (Stokstad 176). Similar resolve in human personality is evident in our society among victims of tragedy and hardship. As this conclusion is based on my perception, reductionists would argue that my conclusion is inherently flawed. Additional problems arise when alternative interpretations of the same image are posed to me. Since these interpretations are equally subjective, there no way to accurately discern which is correct. However, my understanding of the human condition would expand despite my lack of arrival at an absolute truth.

In addition to gaining perspective about the subjects of artwork, art provides an outlet for its audience's personality and emotions as well. Through viewing a piece of artwork or reading an author's manuscripts, a knower is encouraged to respond emotionally and detect similarities between their own lives and the lives of the subjects of the author's works. There are likely going to be misinterpretations and dynamic mood shifts in the knower, but that does not take away from the awareness gained by reflection upon a piece of artwork. In this sense, art is an important tool in recognizing the subtleties of one's own life and personality. While these individual responses are purely subjective and thus incapable of leading to an absolute truth they are invaluable means of self-discovery.

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